

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

### **Inquiry into Tackling Climate Change in Victorian Communities**

Wangaratta—Thursday, 13 February 2020

#### **MEMBERS**

Mr Darren Cheeseman—Chair

Mr David Morris—Deputy Chair

Mr Will Fowles

Ms Danielle Green

Mr Paul Hamer

Mr Tim McCurdy

Mr Tim Smith

**WITNESSES**

Ms Larissa Montgomery, Environmental Sustainability Coordinator, Benalla Rural City Council;

Cr Jenny O'Connor, Mayor, and

Cr Sophie Price, Deputy Mayor, Indigo Shire Council;

Ms Amanda Priest, Coordinator, Environmental Sustainability,

Mr Vito Albicini, Director, Assets and Development, and

Cr Rebecca Bowles, Murrindindi Shire Council;

Mr Scott Draper, Natural Resource Manager and Sustainability Coordinator, Rural City of Wangaratta;

Cr Kat Bennett, and

Ms Robyn Nicholas, Sustainability Coordinator, Wodonga City Council.

**The CHAIR:** Welcome, everyone, to the public hearing. I will just run through some important formalities before we begin.

All evidence taken today will be recorded by Hansard and is protected by parliamentary privilege. This means that you can speak freely without fear of legal action in relation to the evidence that you give. However, it is important to remember that parliamentary privilege does not apply to comments made outside of the hearing even if you are restating what you said during the hearing. You will receive a draft transcript of your evidence in the next week or so for you to check and approve. Corrected transcripts are published on the Committee's website and may be quoted from in our final report.

Thank you for making the time to meet with the Committee today. Could each of you please state your full name and title for the record.

**Mr DRAPER:** Scott Draper, Natural Resource Manager and Sustainability Coordinator for the Rural City of Wangaratta.

**Cr BENNETT:** I am Kat Bennett. I am a Councillor from Wodonga City Council.

**Ms NICHOLAS:** Robyn Nicholas, Sustainability Coordinator for Wodonga council.

**Cr PRICE:** Sophie Price, Deputy Mayor, Indigo Shire Council.

**Cr O'CONNOR:** Jenny O'Connor, Mayor of Indigo Shire Council.

**Ms MONTGOMERY:** Larissa Montgomery, Environmental Sustainability Coordinator at Benalla Rural City Council.

**Cr BOWLES:** Cr Rebecca Bowles from Murrindindi council.

**Mr ALBICINI:** Vito Albicini, Director of Assets and Development for Murrindindi Shire Council.

**Ms PRIEST:** Amanda Priest, Coordinator, Environmental Sustainability at Murrindindi Shire Council.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Who would like to go first? Should we start with Scott?

**Mr DRAPER:** I am happy to start.

**The CHAIR:** Fantastic.

**Mr DRAPER:** I would like to thank the Committee for coming to Wangaratta. Wangaratta is a very strong regional centre that provides services for the surrounding agricultural areas and provides strong commercial and health facilities. Therefore our council recognises the importance of building climate resilience and adapting to climate change, adapting to extreme weather events within our community and business sectors and to protect our natural environment.

Since 2005 the Rural City of Wangaratta has been at the forefront with our habitation and mitigation of climate change. As a founding member of the North East Greenhouse Alliance, which is now just standard and defunct, we were able to develop a range of partnerships that led to a number of major projects, including the Solar North East Project, the development of an eco-living demonstration precinct in Wangaratta, partnering in adapting to a low-water future project, the Watts Working Better project, which Bronwyn mentioned earlier, and a whole range of other projects. Wangaratta is a renowned gateway to the region's tourist attractions and so again that adaptation and mitigation is really important.

In 2010 Wangaratta conducted a citizens jury, or a deliberative democracy process, in partnership with DELWP and Alpine shire, which looked at the concept of how can we work better with the community to adapt to climate change or a changing climate. What that deliberative democracy process allowed us to do was to develop some strong recommendations to council from the community which fed into our environmental sustainability strategy, which was developed in 2015. We have embedded the climate risks facing council in both our strategic operations and our council risk registers, and we are currently in the process of developing a new environmental sustainability strategy which will address all of these.

Community engagement is a huge part of what we do at council. We work very closely with the community groups, Landcare, the North East Regional Sustainability Alliance, the Wangaratta Sustainability Network and Landcare, and a whole range of other groups and community members.

The achievements so far—what we have done so far—I touched on a few of the projects. We are just opening a regional organic waste processing facility out at Bowser which will compost up to 5200 tonnes of organic material every year, which will service not only us but our surrounding municipalities. With our environmental sustainability strategy we developed a range of targets around electricity, fuel and gas, and water usage. One of those was a 20 per cent reduction between 2006 and 2016, which we managed to achieve. So now we are about setting targets for the future in our new environmental sustainability strategy.

We have had a couple of solar farm applications approved in the Rural City of Wangaratta. We have also got one which is in the pipeworks at the moment; it is going to our February council meeting. In addition to that, council has installed a number of solar installations on our council buildings, so in our sports and aquatic centre, childcare centre, saleyards and a number of regional community halls.

At the moment we are transitioning our fleet vehicles to hybrids, and we are also part of the statewide project that Bronwyn talked about before, the Charging the Regions project, where we are exploring the role of governments in EV charging infrastructure. We are also at the moment putting in two EV chargers in our new railway precinct.

Again I will touch on the partnerships with community groups. We do a lot of environmental education work around sustainability and the environment, so we run a whole range of education days and school events too to back that up.

There is a concern for our council around climate change in, I guess, the extreme weather events. We have obviously had the bushfires this season. Our risk assessments identified riverine flooding, bushfires and storm events in our top six threats to the municipality. So with climate change likely to see an increase in extreme weather events, our municipal emergency management plan is well placed to meet this trend. However, more support and funding needs to be given to the roles of municipal fire prevention officers and municipal emergency management coordinators. These are not funded by State Government, or at least only partly funded by State Government, so we think that would be a very important step.

In our recent bushfires—while we were not actually in the impact zone, a very small area of our municipality was affected by the bushfires—we became a regional emergency relief centre. So with more extreme events forecast due to the changing climate, we believe it is vital to explore retrofitting existing community locations to be off-grid options for relief centres in the regional areas. One other thing that our municipal fire prevention

committee has identified also is that there is a decreased window for fuel reduction burns. We do a lot of work with CFA. So due to climate change there is a reduced window for hazard reduction burning, which has an impact upon fire management.

Bronwyn touched a little bit this morning on environmental sustainability design. We have been very active in that space as well. We believe the greatest effect to create more energy-efficient and resilient houses would be to mandate higher standards in building regulations, in particular around design, energy efficiency and construction, adopting a higher threshold for hazard recognition that accommodates the potential impacts of climate change. At the moment State planning policy discusses the issue of climate change. However, the tools for implementation are limited and fail to allow councils to adequately recognise and plan for the potential impacts.

In closing, I would just like to emphasise those partnerships that our council in particular has in this space through the greenhouse alliances, through Landcare, through the North East CMA, and would hope to be provided with ongoing funding to foster those partnerships and increase investment in capacity building and training for councils and councillors.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks, Scott. Thank you for your presentation. Councillor, did you want to add to that?

**Cr BENNETT:** Robyn will be talking primarily about what is happening in Wodonga, and I have got just a few points to add to the Wodonga presentation.

**The CHAIR:** All right, fantastic. Robyn, over to you.

**Ms NICHOLAS:** Thank you. Wodonga council has a very strong community in relation to being active on climate change. We have a couple of groups that I would like to mention, some of which will be presenting a little bit later. Renewable Albury Wodonga or, as they are commonly called, RAW Energy, are an active group that are actually increasing the uptake of renewable energy in our area.

I often mention Albury and Wodonga; obviously we are a border town, so that brings in New South Wales, Albury, as well, and that in itself brings some issues with legislation when we try and do things collectively. We are one community, so if there was an opportunity to work through some of those glitches with our funding, that would be useful as well.

RAW also believes that you can increase development of renewable energy projects through reliance on actually getting rooftop solar through bulk-buyers and those sorts of things, so additional funding for those is good. RAW was successful in a project with BeyondHousing to assist in reducing energy usage by installing 4-kilowatt solar panels on 10 houses. These houses also have an Ubi system, so the actual occupants of the houses can actually see their energy use and modify their behaviours that way. So that is a good way of supporting people that need that assistance.

There is a lot of concern in our community in relation to the renewable energy transition. A lot of people have been left behind, and they need to be supported. In Wodonga we have the highest disconnect percentage, so that is a concern for our community.

Wodonga council are very similar to what Scott was saying in that we have a very strong energy efficiency project—we are putting panels on the roofs of many of our buildings. Also we would like to see our relief centres with an off-the-grid facility in relation to strong events that remove the power. We have introduced a three-bin system, which has also reduced kerbside landfill by 71 per cent, so that has also helped with emissions reduction. Wodonga council is also introducing apparently nine hybrid vehicles to reduce the emissions from our fleet. We also have an active community group called WATCH, and they are presenting today. They are keeping first and foremost in our community the impact of human-induced climate change. I will leave that to Lizette to tell you a little bit more about it.

In our region we also have the North East Regional Sustainability Alliance. They are a local network, an informal alliance, where a lot of community groups and local governments get together and work on solutions together to help with climate adaptation and mitigation. We also have an ecoportal, and it was first established

in March 2012. That is where groups get together, and I think that the strongest thing in relation to communities working together to mitigate and adapt in relation to climate is through those sorts of facilities.

Some of the things that Wodonga Council also has are a sustainability strategy and a climate change adaptation action plan. Those two plans are up for renewal, so we will be bringing in some of the more recent science in relation to our actions.

There are some ways that we are seeking in which Government can support our communities. It can continue to provide funding for communities and local governments to achieve local, ongoing actions to adapt, innovate, mitigate and reduce the impacts of climate change. It can lead and support the community through introducing legislation, stewardship and financial support or incentives to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. It can provide financial means to ensure that there are refuge or infrastructure facilities available to support those that are not able to afford the rising energy costs caused by the impacts of climate change—those refuge centres can be from bushfires or extreme weather events. It can provide incentives for carbon sequestration in all forms, as in planting indigenous trees, activated carbon or protecting and enhancing our forest areas. It can also provide incentives for industry and innovators to continue to improve the efficiency and end use of products.

**Cr BENNETT:** I will just add a few points. As Robyn mentioned, we have actually got the highest rate of disconnection in Australia. That is a huge impact for our people. We have certainly seen a lot of circumstances of people not being able to pay for heating and cooling, which obviously has a real flow-on effect on their health. We know that climate change affects everyone, but it certainly affects vulnerable people the most. Also, as people on this panel would know, this area is a really significant food bowl, so having that pressure on our farmers and agriculture certainly again not only affects the people here but has a huge flow-on effect to other people in Australia.

We have seen with these recent bushfires one of the huge, big things is all the smoke. Even for the towns that have not been directly affected by bushfires, having constant smoke means people cannot go outside, huge respiratory problems and a drop in physical activity as well. I think there needs to be support for councils to better understand their risk and be able to really take that more seriously, so better understanding for councils to do modelling, and obviously we have been working on historical data which might not be actually giving us the accurate reflection of what is happening for the future, and we are resource poor, so having someone to help us coordinate that would be really handy. If we want to meet the State Government targets by 2050, there needs to be some more game-changing things happen like the local government power purchase procurement agreement. That will be the biggest procurement deal in Australia, which is huge and is a game changer, but not all councils are being involved with that. So having support for all councils to do that will actually help us probably try and meet those targets, which at the moment we are not going to be able to do. As Bronwyn talked about, having VicRoads come on board with the LED streetlighting again would really help us.

Something that I am really hearing from community is not understanding everything that all the councils are actually doing. So say, for example, councils are mandated to look at their municipal health and wellbeing plan. So it is sort of a bit clearer for community to see exactly what councils are doing and that we are mandated to do something, but obviously all councils really have climate mitigation strategies but being able to mandate that and having a clear way that councils could report on that would also help community get a better understanding of everything councils are already doing.

**Ms NICHOLAS:** And the tools.

**Cr BENNETT:** And the tools to be able to do that.

Robyn also talked about the three-bin system. So we were one of the first in Victoria to do that and, as Robyn said, it has diverted 70 per cent away from landfill, which is fantastic. We all know we are in a waste crisis, so being able to again help those other councils in Victoria who are not using a three-bin system would be fantastic as well, so looking at more support for how they could roll that out around Victoria.

**The CHAIR:** Fantastic. Thanks, Councillor. We might go to Indigo.

**Cr O'CONNOR:** Hi, I am Jenny O'Connor, I am the Mayor. I do not want to repeat stuff because you have already heard these things. So I guess I am really going to talk from a very community-focused point of view, a small rural community.

So Indigo shire has 16 000 people, 32 communities. Unlike a regional city where everyone is together, we have a very diverse network of towns. Very parochial, very proud of each of their own identities, and they are all trying to do something themselves. So we are a very community-driven, if you like, council, and our role really is to support those communities the best way we can.

As a small rural shire I do not need to tell you we are very under-resourced. We are already trying to manage basic infrastructure costs and service delivery. Now dealing with the impact of climate change, which is having a huge impact on our communities, is another burden to us that I do not think we are well-equipped to deal with despite all of our best intentions.

Of course we have climate mitigation adaptation plans, but we were also the first rural shire in Victoria to declare a climate emergency. That was controversial, to say the least, because among our 32 small communities some of them are very, very conservative, and we also have well-represented climate-denying people in our shire who really clearly do not understand what is really going on and have been fed a load of misinformation, as we know. That is a big problem for us politically. However, we feel we have to take a strong leadership position and wear the fallout from that.

By declaring a climate emergency declaration, the risk to that is that we have these words that do not mean anything. So how do we make that meaningful? The way that we are trying to deal with that, we have actually just employed some expert consultants. We have been able to allocate \$12 000. That is all our budget would allow; we would like to allocate 10 times that. So my plea to the State Government is: can you please give us adequate resourcing so we can do the work that we are very prepared to do with our communities. You will benefit in the end if we can do this, but we do not have the resources.

So we have given \$12 000. The consultants are so prepared to do this work that they are actually doing it for far less than they normally would. These are people who care deeply about the risk that our communities are facing. So that will be the work that will then inform council around what needs to happen to do urgent, immediate action. We are not the experts in that. That is why we are getting people in that are, and they will work with our environment staff. The idea is that everything council does will come through a lens that takes into account the real risks of climate change. The obvious ones are of course the natural disasters, but risk to agriculture, risk to health and wellbeing, risk to mental health and the economic impacts.

I just want to give you a very clear understanding of what has happened this summer for us in Indigo shire. We are a very tourism-dependent shire. We were not fire affected directly. Bear in mind we have eight weeks to go, so I am still like this, but nevertheless we have not had fires in our shire. However, north-east Victoria was obviously a high-risk area. Many of our businesses are now reporting 80 per cent loss of income. So the economic impact, even when we have not been directly affected, is just utterly devastating. Now we may still have fires this coming season. If not, we may well have them into the future, so there is the obvious risk to life and property. But the economic impact and the impact on these small, tiny businesses—owner operated, they provide casual seasonal employment to many in our towns—there are all sorts of flow-on effects that we are just starting to realise.

For example, many of our kids go to Melbourne or Sydney for university, for tertiary education. They come home to work in the holidays. That is what gives them the income to go back to university and survive, because their families are not wealthy, they cannot pay rent for their kids. These are just some of the less-than-obvious impacts that we now are going to face with families who are having to manage, and kids who are having to manage, debts that they should not be burdened with as a result of climate change. Again, the lack of adequate welfare support for people at the moment is really dreadful. We are talking about people accessing Foodbank, for heaven's sake, people who run businesses and try and employ people. We have people who are not taking wages for themselves so they can keep employing their own employees because they know that they are so dependent. These are low-income families who are now being utterly traumatised by this. So the impact on mental health is real. We are seeing it in our communities. People are talking to us about that. Again, I am trying to put a very human lens on this today because we will hear all the technical speak. I have also seen Bronwyn's presentation, and it is incredibly concerning because everything I say today is going to keep happening next year, the year after and the year after and onwards with increasing impact.

So this is what we are facing in Indigo shire. I am on the board of Rural Councils Victoria as well—that is 38 small rural shires—so I will take this opportunity to point out that this is across Victoria. Every area is impacted differently: drought, flood now, fire, and that is just this summer. So the State Government, I urge you to take this extremely seriously and to support the shires and the councils who will work directly with their communities who can actually bring about change.

The good news story in this is what our communities are already doing. Totally Renewable Yackandandah has been the flagship for highlighting the transition to renewable energy.

**The CHAIR:** We are heading there this afternoon, you will be pleased to know.

**Cr O'CONNOR:** Yes, and I will see you there again today. You will be blown away by what they have done. It has sparked RAW Energy, Totally Renewable Beechworth and all these other groups. They have been incredibly generous with their learnings. And they have been supported by AusNet and Mondo Power to do very real work. There are areas in our shire which have microgrids already, and they are sharing their energy, they are storing their energy. Again, they need subsidies. We need money to support people to do that. Low-income families who most need low-cost energy cannot afford it. I think Kat mentioned that. That is critical. If we could get a scheme where low-income families could not just put in LED lights but could actually store energy, share energy, it would take pressure off the grid, so it makes sense to do that.

I think if you look at what our communities are doing, there are Plasticwise groups in our community that have eliminated plastic bags and have actually got the businesses in town to do that themselves, long before the State Government was doing that. If you give us the resources to engage with our communities, they will take the lead and they will actually implement things that are practical, on the ground. They are not waiting for government policy; they are actually getting on with it way before government gets in there. They offer advice to government, and we also have an environment advisory committee, again made up of volunteers, community people who are very professionally trained and experienced, who advise council on what needs to happen. So we listen and we actually take the advice, and I think that is clearly what you guys are doing today, and that is fantastic. If we listen to our communities, we have the answers. They have the answers. And then all you need to do is give us the money to implement them and you will see very practical outcomes. We are already trying to do that, as I say, with far too limited a budget. It is very frustrating when we can see what could happen with the right resourcing. In terms of bang for buck you get a fantastic outcome for every dollar you invest in rural communities.

That is probably all I want to say, actually, if that is okay. I have got lots of technical stuff here, but I do not think that is what you need to hear.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Jenny. I might just ask one question. Obviously there are lots of shires like yours that have very strong links to the tourism economy. With climate change do you think having our main summer holidays in January going forward is going to be a wise thing to do?

**Cr O'CONNOR:** I have to say this is a conversation we have been having. Obviously—and I think I raised it in Canberra recently at a forum—clearly January is a dangerous time, so people are not going to want to bring their families into areas. Even if there is not a fire yet, everybody knows that there is the risk of that. I will point out that in the coastal communities—and it is horrific seeing what happened in Mallacoota—people were standing in the water up to their knees with the fires down to the beach. We do not have beaches. We do not have places people can go. Our communities are undefendable, and I do not need to tell Danielle this—you know this very well from Black Saturday. That is what we are facing here.

There is resourcing around protection. We are getting told to just evacuate. Every time it is a hot day—evacuate. To where? And where do you take your chooks and your hens? This is the reality of it, so of course people do not. But there are places of last resort, which have been misnamed as safer places, and the CFA clearly says they are not safe; they cannot defend them and there is no guarantee anyone will be there. So there is that very practical infrastructure need that we have. You tell people to evacuate—where are they going to go to? How do we protect the people of Stanley or Yackandandah that have one road in and one road out and cannot get out if a fire starts there?

That is the stuff that I worry about at night when I wake up going, ‘This is climate change. This is what’s happening in rural communities. We’ve already seen it’. I know Danielle has been through this in Black Saturday. My own family were affected. Danielle knows about that too.

**Ms GREEN:** They are my constituents.

**Cr O’CONNOR:** I am really passionate about this. I think we need to face facts. We are talking about risk to life in rural areas. Yes, we need to change our holiday seasons because who is going to bring their kids into that, and why would they? They should not, frankly. So, yes, structural changes like that are massive.

**The CHAIR:** I think about it from a perspective of potentially taking a million people out of Melbourne in January into the regions when—

**Cr O’CONNOR:** Where there is no safe place to go on the day—the many days—that we have fires. So, yes, they are the kind of structural issues as well, and we are very fortunate we can go to a relief centre in Wangaratta. But after the fifth time people just do not do it. And also fires can start right in our patch and people have not got time. So they are things that need to be taken into consideration as well.

**Cr PRICE:** Obviously we are talking about how in our community there is a lot of energy towards solving this locally, but I think that the opportunity here for the State Government, as Jenny said, is that if you just partner with us in that, then you will help us to build on that. Already small rurals—small communities—under-resourced, learning the way, are making huge changes, but if you as a state government decide to partner with us, you will see a huge benefit to that. I think that is what we are trying to do as Indigo Shire by declaring a climate emergency: we are going to put in a framework that means that it is business as usual at our council, and that is really just going to reflect the framework that the community has. They are already operating in that way, and so really we are playing catch-up with our communities in many ways. We are lucky that we have, even with our limited resources, opportunities through the Goulburn Broken Greenhouse Alliance and through our environment advisory committee that is made up of reps from Parks, NECMA, Landcare, Plastic Wise, community groups, councillors and council staff. We already have these links out into our community, but what we are trying to do is reflect what the community’s ask is. I suppose that is what our ask is of State Government—to say, ‘Come and have a look at the projects that we’re doing and just help us’.

**Cr O’CONNOR:** And they can be replicated; that is the other thing, yes.

**The CHAIR:** Terrific, thank you. Larissa, are you part of that group? I cannot see—

**Ms MONTGOMERY:** No, I am from Benalla Rural City. I just wanted to thank you for providing the opportunity to participate in the Inquiry today and for coming up to the regional areas to do that. In another role I am also the Chair of the Goulburn Broken Greenhouse Alliance committee. You have just heard from our Executive Officer, Bronwyn Chapman. The alliance is an unincorporated association and is currently auspiced by Greater Shepparton City Council. The alliance is financed by annual member contributions, which are based on a per-head-of-population basis to ensure equity across the different councils. The alliance committee essentially serves as a committee of management, ensuring the governance arrangements are in place and that the alliance is performing well in terms of our strategic plan and annual business plan and complying with all of our legal and financial obligations. As you have already heard from Bronwyn, I will not go into the wonderful projects that we are involved in through the alliance, except to say that the alliance plays a really vital role for our small rural community’s ability to participate in some of those larger projects and that it creates an economy of scale and efficiencies that are just not achievable for our small councils. As we have already heard too, most of our small councils only have one or maybe two officers working in the environment and sustainability area, and we work over multiple departments, so the alliance provides an invaluable source of networking, information-sharing and peer-to-peer support. So, yes, the alliance is really important to our region.

Just a quick snapshot of Benalla. Our council is to the immediate west of Wangaratta here. We have a population of around 14 000, 9000 of which are within Benalla town and 5000 scattered throughout the rural area. As with Indigo, we have quite a number of small rural communities across the landscape. Agriculture is the primary land use, with the majority of this being prime lamb and beef production and broadacre cropping. There are also quite a number of, I guess, energy-intensive industries operating in the area and more recently a

lot of interest in solar farm developments. We have currently had four solar farms receive planning permits. One is under a notice of decision, and there are quite a few more in the pipeline. I mention that because it is all relevant when we are thinking about climate change and the impacts that that will have on those industries.

As Cr O'Connor mentioned, I do not want to repeat what everyone else has said. I did just want to touch on funding in particular and the project that we have recently been involved in and how successful that has been for us. Benalla has been participating in Sustainability Victoria's Local Government Energy Saver Program. This program has been working with 22 resource-constrained regional councils across Victoria, and it has provided non-competitive funding, which was delivered across three streams. The first stream allowed us to do a greenhouse reduction plan and inventory. The second stream allowed us to move forward with some of the recommendations of that reduction plan, and we had detailed building energy audits undertaken. Stream three provided for one-to-one matched funding of up to \$100 000 to actually implement some of the recommendations of the building energy audits.

So through that program we have undertaken LED lighting upgrades to our art gallery, town hall, senior citizens centre and library. We have done some smaller things, like window film and air conditioning upgrades. We have installed a 27-kilowatt solar system on the senior cits, and as we speak there is a 60-kilowatt solar system going in on the library. Overall this is expected to result in annual electricity cost savings of around \$55 000 and a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions of about 250 tonnes.

This model of funding has worked really well for us. Being non-competitive and implemented over the stages has allowed us to, firstly, understand the need for the project or the upgrades, develop the business case and, probably most importantly, allowed us plenty of time to put the project through the annual budget planning process and allocate the capital funds to be able to undertake the project knowing that the funding is non-competitive.

Again, as Cr O'Connor mentioned, we are a small council, and I guess that gives us a great benefit of being able to work really closely with our local community. In my role I work closely with the Benalla Sustainable Future Group, who I think presented to you yesterday, and a subgroup of that group, the Renewable Energy Benalla group.

We have seen across the Hume region that there is a great community appetite for action on climate change, including the transition to renewable energy and sustainable housing and living in general. However, and I guess I am speaking for our Benalla group in particular, they are really struggling to get traction. Often they are overwhelmed by the wealth of information that is available and potential actions that they can take. Even just keeping up with the information coming in, the grants that are available, can be difficult. We have seen that the recent funding for community groups is really highly competitive, usually being oversubscribed. It means that smaller groups who have limited resources often even struggle to get an application in, let alone a quality application, and therefore they normally lose out in that competitive process. It is kind of just a continuing cycle. So more non-competitive funding, with longer term implementation phases or successive rounds of a funding program would be really well received both by councils and community groups. This is far more likely to mobilise local communities and provide more meaningful strategic and longer term outputs, therefore obviously getting better value for the funding dollar. Also, as Bronwyn touched on earlier, some sort of Landcare facilitator role, or a program similar to that, in the climate change space would really help these smaller groups get traction within the community.

Probably just one other thing, and again it is on the funding topic, is we currently receive State Government funding for roadside weed and pest control. Obviously they are likely to be things that will be really influenced by a changing climate, and councils will be expected to respond to those changes. That funding at the minute is not committed beyond this financial year, and it would be really great to have that funding committed on a longer term basis to allow us to plan for those changes. Thank you for your time.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. I just would like to acknowledge Tim Quilty, Northern Victoria, upper house, or the Legislative Council. So welcome, Tim.

Indigo. Who is going to—

**Mr ALBICINI:** Murrindindi.

**The CHAIR:** Murrindindi—all right, sorry. I need to get some glasses, clearly.

**Mr ALBICINI:** Thank you for the opportunity to present to the Committee. I have got Cr Bowles here, who is our environmental water councillor.

**Cr BOWLES:** Portfolio.

**Mr ALBICINI:** Portfolio councillor. And Amanda here, who knows all the details about the environment, not just as part of the team. So we are also a small rural council. It serves about 13 000 ratepayers. Similar to yourselves we have got a large land base—communities that are distant—with a small rate base to support the funding of how our council operates. We have a small team, in the environment team. Most of their tasks are really about natural resource management and land use management, but they also obviously work hard in the areas of climate change and energy management. Some of the things which I suppose have been presented by the other councils are similar to ours, to be quite frank about it. We have similar issues and broader issues and we have similar desires, and we struggle because of our resourcing needs and capacity.

Some of the tasks we have done in the past are that we have been involved in several sustainability projects, including the LED street lighting, the solar bulk-buy and participation in the Local Government Energy Saver Program with Sustainable Victoria—and that was made possible through funding from the State Government. The other aspects we have been looking at doing are things like providing or purchasing electric vehicles, so we are starting to do that as well and provide points for recharge in townships. So we are looking at the township of Alexandra as well as also at Kinglake. But we are also trying to understand the impacts of the climate emergency policy and how we actually deal with that, with the impact of the recycling industry and how that has become a major problem for Australia and Victoria, as well as the EPA legislation. We will need to sort of think about how we deal with that.

So most of these things actually take a lot of time and effort with our resources to be able to understand and to be able to impact any change associated with that, which really stops us from doing a lot of the strategic work, and that is probably one of the areas that we are struggling with. We tend to be doing a lot of the program work or the things that are funded and the day-to-day tasks and working with our community, but we really struggle in setting up adaptation plans or greenhouse action plans et cetera to actually put a strategic lens on how we want to progress the municipality moving forward. So that is really a struggle for us at this stage. Most of our resources are generally dealing with the day-to-day.

And some of the things that happen for us as a small council probably happen to yourselves as well—things like the recent events and the impact of climate change on storm damage or fire et cetera. Recently we have had storm damage, which is quite unique for Murrindindi. We had three storm events within about three weeks, which is not common. Normally you might get one. And we are dealing with that right now, with a massive amount of tree damage and storm damage. It also impacts our resourcing, so not only do we have to resource that sort of work but we also have to fund it, so it is half a million dollars going towards storm damage that we were not expecting. Again, it drains our capacity to work on the stuff that stops that from happening. That is our issue that we are having.

The other pressures we are having at the moment are really about land use management, similar to what I think Larissa was saying about the recent funding for pest and weed management, which is really supportive. But again that is a program that State Government is offering for councils to help administer it, but it is a program of supporting landowners in knowing how to best manage pests and weeds. We cannot sustain that program. Once you get the funding for one or two years, we cannot sustain it moving forward. It is great to get that funding, but you need the ongoing funding sustainability for it.

For Murrindindi, if we look at our probably five key asks, most of our concerns and what we try to achieve are similar to the other smaller councils—and most of the other similar types of councils. But some of the things we see are better funding for the catchment management authorities so that they can actually get more, I think, conscious of how they deal with things, so that they do look at improving the stream networks and so they do look at removing weed matter across all the river networks et cetera, which will help us maintain our weeds et cetera. One of the things we did pick up is that AgVic in the past did have assessors and people out in the field to support farmers. That seems to have been retracted, so we have taken on that lead with Landcare and

those groups to try to continue that growth, but to have that reinstated would probably help with the land management issues that we have in a rural environment and the weed and pest control issues.

The resourcing support was mentioned before—even if it could be regional. Because there is a lot of knowledge amongst our group of councillors that could be tapped into to create adaptation plans et cetera that meet all our needs, but rather than all of us doing it individually, maybe there is an opportunity for governments to consider resourcing and supporting us in developing those plans so there are some consistent frameworks across the region and to help us get the strategic work done so we can then embed it in our work practices, in our asset management practices and in the way we deliver our services.

The other area is—this is more of a specific topic—the need for councillors to, I suppose, use hybrid vehicles or green products or even recycled products like recycled materials for asphalt et cetera. It is a bit hard for us in a rural council to get that in place because the infrastructure is not there or you cannot attract the market. We have got a fairly big street scope work, which for us is \$1 million or \$1.5 million, and we want to get green asphalt there, but to get a company to come and do it is difficult because we have not got the volume. So how do we get that happening in a rural area? Because we are keen to do it, but we just cannot get it. Also how do we create an environment where we can use hybrid vehicles, electric vehicles, in a rural setting where you can consume 1000 kilometres in a day? Those are the difficulties we have.

The big one for us, and it is clearly evident in front of us right now, is about emergency management and how that is becoming a reality now. I think you mentioned it yourself. It is not something that happens once in a while; it is going to happen more regularly. I think we have got to realise that. Ten years ago I remember discussions around climate change and how the sort of impact you will have is greater storm events, significant rainstorms et cetera. Well, they are happening now. So we have got to realise that now we will have more events like we have had recently, and therefore we need to plan better and, as you were mentioning, be more adaptable, and we need to do that work right now. So there needs to be resourcing to help us do that, because we are doing a lot of it ourselves.

Really for us it is not just an individual government; it is a whole-of-government approach from the federal to the state to the local government. We work well with our community—that is where we stand—but we need the support from above us to help us to deliver it. That is us.

**The CHAIR:** Fantastic. Would either of your colleagues like to add anything?

**Cr BOWLES:** There are a few things I would like to say. Like a lot of people in this room I went through Black Saturday. I do not think our community or our shire council would actually be able to cope with another one of them again. So I am just putting that on the table.

The state agricultural draft report has just come out; it was at the end of last year at some stage. It talks a lot about sustainable agriculture on smaller lots. Murrindindi shire has predominantly, historically, a lot of small landholdings from when we were a mining and forestry shire. We have a lot of difficulty within the state planning scheme and the Murrindindi planning scheme, which is based on the state scheme, in being able to administer these small lots with what is in the draft report for agriculture. There are a lot of people who actually want to do small horticultural sustainable farming, but we cannot underneath the planning scheme. So I do not get how we can actually have a big hotel being put in the Murrindindi shire but you cannot actually have sustainable farming lots—organic farming lots—on smaller acreages of 40 acres or less. I just do not get it.

I would also just like to remind people that Landcare was actually started in the bush. It was not actually started in the city, so it actually needs a lot more funding because Landcare are actually doing a lot of the on-ground work. In the Upper Goulburn Landcare Network, which I am on the committee of, we have 12 Landcare groups in our area. We are tending to get away from a lot of the things like planting trees and planting wattles and all of that kind of stuff because we have got a lot of that. We are actually looking at doing a lot of understorey planting to create a habitat, which are along most of our roadways in the agricultural areas. But we are also looking at doing a lot more forums on regenerative farming. And for a lot of the agricultural people that I talk to there is no framework. I went on the AgVic website this morning. There is no framework for carbon farming and there is no framework for regenerative farming at all on the AgVic website, and that is our pre-eminent website for our farmers and producers to go through. I know regenerative agriculture is a big buzzword at the

moment—it has been out there for quite a long time—but I think you need to step up to actually have a framework for our farmers to actually get into. I think that was it.

No, there was another one about Eildon, because the State is actually spending a lot of money on Eildon, as you very well know, Danielle. The Goulburn River is now basically one big irrigation ditch, but there seems to be a mismatch about what the State is actually doing for Eildon, having the boat show and all that kind of stuff, but a lot of the water is actually getting drained out. Going about the tourism in summer, if we do not have any water in Eildon, we do not have any tourism up there because it is all based on the Goulburn River drainage ditch which is farm and farming. So I just think we need to actually start looking at that and balancing that out.

**The CHAIR:** Amanda, did you want a go?

**Ms PRIEST:** Yes, just a few things. Just to reiterate what Vito and Bec were saying, at the community level in Murrindindi there is a lot of interest in topics like regenerative agriculture, permaculture, distributed energy networks and sustainable living. The main challenges that we face in rural areas are coordination and support of these groups and the individuals working on these ideas. We have limited expertise in our organisation on really complex things like distributed energy networks—we do not have an energy network in our organisation to help these groups—or regenerative agriculture, for example. So places like Landcare need ongoing funding so they can develop long-term projects that lead to change and collaboration of those local groups.

It is something that we struggle with as well. When grant funding does come out one of the biggest questions is: can we resource this project? And often grant funding has a restriction on the ability to get a resource in the seat to develop the project, so we cannot pay for wages with the grant funding, which can be a real roadblock for a small rural council. Our team is 1.8 equivalent full-time staff, and we deliver all the environmental and sustainability projects, the council, and the business-as-usual, day-to-day work of managing 1200 kilometres of roadsides for weeds and pests and biodiversity conservation.

So having roles back in Agriculture Victoria and DELWP in the regions that can sit down and have a cup of tea with farmers and talk to them about these complex areas like regenerative farming—sorry, regenerative agriculture—or sit down and talk to them about how they manage their land and the weeds and pests, because they are going to become more and more profound in the landscape, is a really valuable service that we feel is missing. The lack of those boots on the ground has had a really big impact on the landscape health across the regional areas. I just wanted to reiterate that that is a really important thing that the State used to do and still does in some capacity, but we need to think about how we can all work together better.

**The CHAIR:** Terrific. Thanks, Amanda.

**Cr BOWLES:** Can I just say one more thing?

**The CHAIR:** Yes.

**Cr BOWLES:** As the council environment portfolio councillor, because we have such a small staff in our environment section, I feel really guilty when we are going, ‘Right, we’re actually going to do a Dindi bulk-buy scheme’ or, ‘We’re actually going to be doing the first ever Murrindindi sustainability forum’. I feel really guilty because I know how much these guys actually work, but our capacity—I kind of stretch it a bit.

**Cr BENNETT:** Can I add one more, I promise very quick, point?

**The CHAIR:** Yes.

**Cr BENNETT:** Out of 153 submissions, I notice there were no hospital or community health or primary care partnership people having their voice.

**Cr BOWLES:** There was.

**Cr BENNETT:** There was?

**Cr BOWLES:** One.

**Cr BENNETT:** One. So it might—I think it is actually; it is not ‘might’—it would be really important to make sure the health service has their voice in this as well.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. We might start with questions. Thank you, everyone, for your presentations. I thought it was important to try and go through all of the presentations first before we got to questions. I might start with Tim, if that is all right.

**Mr McCURDY:** Perfect. Thank you all very much for coming. When we get our city colleagues to come to the country I am delighted to hear that you talk about under-resourcing—not that I am delighted to hear that you are under-resourced, but reminding my city colleagues that we all do things differently and we cannot look at the Whitehorse and the Darebin councils of the world and compare council with council, because we have seen here today what Wodonga, Wangaratta, Indigo and others do.

I think what we are finding is it is horses for courses. There are different things that affect your council, Jenny, and you are taking the lead role, as is the Wangaratta council playing that big brother role when everyone from Harrierville and Bright had to come down out of smoke-affected areas. I think it is important that the resourcing you talk about—and I do not know whether I have got a question for you, Jenny, or not, but I am just hearing what you are saying is that what suits your council might be different to what Wangaratta needs and Wodonga needs because they are the big brother or big sister for other communities.

**Cr O’CONNOR:** Absolutely.

**Mr McCURDY:** And it is just really important that governments can see that. With rate capping that has come in, obviously that is affecting you. I mean, your rate base is probably less than half the car parking revenue in some of these major metropolitan—

**Cr O’CONNOR:** Seriously right.

**Mr McCURDY:** And that is where one size does not fit all, and we cannot say, ‘We’re going to give this grant to all councils for X to do that’, particularly if you have got the runs on the board and have demonstrated that you are acting, whether it is climate change initiatives—

We saw a big flood in Everton last year. We have got fires this year, and what is next year? I just think it is really important that you should be able to prioritise what is important to your council versus what the government thinks you need.

**Cr O’CONNOR:** Can I make a suggestion?

**The CHAIR:** Yes.

**Cr O’CONNOR:** Thank you. Thanks, Tim. I think one of the things is government reacts after a disaster. So councils come in, you guys give us some money to make up for it. That is great, but more and more we are thinking it would be really great to get some of that money up-front so that we could actually build in our infrastructure, improve things, put things in place before the flood, the fire. So one policy that I have seen and which I actually tried to run with in the state election just to try and get it out there was to say, ‘Look, you have got the emergency management fund—I think it is \$4.8 million. Double it, make it \$10 million, which is not a lot of money out of the state coffers, and give us half of it up-front and make that targeted to rural communities’. There is no point giving it to Melbourne. Sorry, I should not say that. They have got other ways of funding this and we do not.

So in that flood in Everton, the bridge washed out to Wangaratta and Beechworth. The entire community could not get to work. The V/Line buses could not get there, and it took months and months and months before it was fixed. That bridge has been replaced now, and no doubt the standard that it is at is better than it was, but if we could do some of that preventative infrastructure work. As simple, if you like—I am talking 5 million bucks, but really, in the scheme of things and given the money from the Port of Melbourne sale, how much of that has been focused in Melbourne when our communities are actually providing all the stuff that we send off anyway? We would really value that money coming so that we could access it.

The other thing is: please, do not make us go through horrendous grant processes. We do not have the personnel and the staff. Every time our staff are writing grants, they are not doing the work that our communities need, and then we cop the blowback from our communities. You guys are a bit protected from that by us, so it would be incredibly helpful even just that immediate strategy of getting us up-front funding and let us work out where it needs to go, because we know.

**Mr McCURDY:** Again particularly where you have demonstrated a track record if you are given money, you will use it wisely.

**Cr O'CONNOR:** We can acquit it.

**Mr McCURDY:** As opposed to other councils who may not use it wisely and then everyone is tarred with the same brush.

**Cr O'CONNOR:** Like I said, Tim, I represent 38 small rural councils and not one of them wastes 1 cent. I can say that hand on heart. Small rural councils, what we do with the money we have is phenomenal and I am very proud of the work we do, speaking on behalf of all of us.

**Ms GREEN:** I think we all agree with that.

**Cr O'CONNOR:** That is what I meant before, I said: dollar for dollar, what you invest in an inner-city council compared to what you invest in our communities, I think it is 38 times the benefit dollar for dollar. That work has been done. It is on the rural councils' website. Have a look at it, it is amazing.

**The CHAIR:** Fantastic.

**Mr ALBICINI:** Can I just—

**The CHAIR:** Add to it, but I know my colleague Paul would like to ask a question.

**Mr ALBICINI:** Thanks, Jenny, because I suppose that was our point: I think we all agree that with the emergencies we need to do more adaptive and resilient planning and emergency management planning to support the communities before the event occurs, but the money seems to come after the event, and that is the area we have got to focus on.

**Mr HAMER:** Thank you all for your presentations. We have heard today and yesterday about the environmentally sustainable design and incorporating that into the planning scheme and particularly from Bronwyn about how we might have horses for courses and you could not assume that you would have the same policy for metro as you would for the regional areas just simply because of the costs involved and the relative costs of incorporating that compared to what it might be in a metro area. So I would just be interested in understanding—it is a very broad term, environmentally sustainable design—what particular policies would you want to see in a regional setting that may be different from, say, a broader setting.

**The CHAIR:** Who wants to take that?

**Ms CHAPMAN:** Can I help out? I will be quick.

**The CHAIR:** Sure. Come to the microphone. You will need to reintroduce yourself.

**Ms CHAPMAN:** Bronwyn Chapman, executive officer, Goulburn Broken Greenhouse Alliance. Just to say that that is what that project is going to sort out. So when that project is finished it will have that answer. And it is not to say that it is different, but the scale might be different or it might concentrate on the things that I guess can be built in at the beginning of the design process that cost less money than if they come later in the design process, like passive orientation and things like that that can be built into the subdivision design process. But it is demonstrating its worth, given that difference in value between metro and regional, so that that case can be made for those general provisions or those needed provisions in the planning scheme.

I am not a planner and we do not have any with us here today, but Wodonga, Wangaratta and Shepparton planners are doing great work in the space. But that report that was given to you yesterday will foreshadow that and this specific work will actually tell us the answer to that.

**The CHAIR:** I might just follow up on that. Obviously parts of all of your municipalities are in landscapes that are potentially risky from a fire perspective. We saw after Black Saturday that the building code was changed to recognise that. I wonder how that also has an impact on designing houses in terms of thermal comfort and orientation and all of that. Can those things work together, those codes?

**Mr ALBICINI:** There is no reason why they cannot.

**Cr BOWLES:** Makes it cost prohibitive.

**The CHAIR:** Yes, that is what I was wondering. Because I have heard stories that the cost of building a home when you have those higher standards can be 20, 30 or 40 per cent more, which is substantial.

**Cr BOWLES:** But you have still also got the problem in the planning scheme where you are allowing people to build on ridges.

**The CHAIR:** Yes.

**Cr BOWLES:** How is that possibly allowed?

**Mr FOWLES:** I have a question about mental health services. We are seeing a rise generally in climate anxiety. You have obviously got fire-affected communities and at times flood-affected communities. What impacts are you seeing on the mental health services you are either associated with or provide directly, and what would you like to see from the State in regard to making sure that your constituents have access to appropriate mental health services?

**Cr BOWLES:** We do not have any in our shire—at all.

**Cr O'CONNOR:** We do not either.

**Cr BENNETT:** We have got Headspace in Wodonga and certainly, again, like Jenny said, lots of people have answers locally so actually just having the funding directed to those areas, but obviously it needs to make sure it captures everywhere. All of the smaller rural areas need to actually capture that because certainly we are definitely seeing a rise in a whole lot of psychological stressors that are coming from that—kids from farming communities and what they are having to deal with. So it would be really important to better fund those areas and make sure the health services actually can span all those different areas—all the small rural councils certainly.

**Mr FOWLES:** So what is the best way, do you think, to deliver those services to rural areas?

**Cr O'CONNOR:** I think you need to work with the local health services to find that out, because it is different in different communities. I have had people saying to me that people that cannot pay their rent next week are being offered counselling. They are like, 'I don't want counselling, I want some cash'. I think again timing is everything. It can seem like it is tokenistic if it is not delivered appropriately. The idea of people coming in—the experts coming in—really drives communities crazy. They do not like it because they have got trusted health workers there and people. So my advice would be genuinely—I think Kat raised it before—that you need to be working with the community health centres regionally, the local hospitals and schools and the people that are working with the most affected communities and of course through the farming associations, like their people. Work through them rather than just coming in from a health department position.

**The CHAIR:** I think Sophie wanted to add to that.

**Cr PRICE:** Yes, again just in terms of what we have done at a local government level, that question was raised when we were talking about the fire even though Indigo was not impacted by fire, certainly smoke. We were receiving all of the warnings from EPA that air is hazardous for weeks on end. So when we were talking to our staff about counting the cost economically and in terms of tourism and things like that, we said we want to count the cost in terms of our health as well. So some really basic things that we were able to do were

increase programming—so increase programs in our libraries and our museums and things like that. So again they are the very small things that we can do as a shire without something like Headspace in our shire. Again it is cash up front to support programs that are within our reach and easy for us to roll out.

**The CHAIR:** I know David had some questions, and I know Danielle had some questions.

**Cr BOWLES:** With the Goulburn Regional Partnership, the thing that came out after the three years of that rounding—and this was actually youth led—was to embed a mental health officer within the school. I think the State has actually—that is going to happen, but when is that actually going to be rolled out?

**Ms GREEN:** It varies from region to region, but I am happy to follow that up with you individually, Bec, because I actually chucked a tanty about the timing for our region and thought it needed to be earlier. From memory, I think it is this year.

Chair, with your indulgence I just wanted to make a quick suggestion to all councils in the room that we have got a once-in-a-generation opportunity with the mental health royal commission. The draft recommendations are out. Even if it says on the website that consultations are closed, can I just encourage you as a collective to really feed in what has happened, particularly this year, and obviously in Murrindindi over the last 11 years.

I know that the Goulburn Regional Partnership, for example, its deep dive is around mental health and they were going to consult around the community in relation to the draft recommendations. But the Premier said all of the recommendations will be adopted and fully funded, so please feed this in. We are a parliamentary committee; we have got a longer time frame. But the stuff with the mental health royal commission, that will come in much earlier, so grab it while it is hot.

**Cr O'CONNOR:** Thank you.

**Mr MORRIS:** Jenny, can I say first of all, a million years ago I was a mayor. I have been in this job for 13 years. I have gotten almost immune to councils asking for more money—as soon as they start talking about money you just tune out—but that is the best ask I have heard in 13 years. Well done.

**Cr O'CONNOR:** Thank you.

**Mr FOWLES:** It is definitely high praise, Jenny.

**Cr O'CONNOR:** I know.

**Mr MORRIS:** I want to come back to an earlier discussion we had on a couple of issues. One is the suggestion that we need more money up front to deal with the infrastructure problems. I was wondering about whether any of you are being pushed by your insurers in terms of risk management on infrastructure or any other issues. And the second question—you raised it, Jenny, I think, and Larissa certainly raised it—in terms of grants and the complexity of applications, one in the context of councils and the other, I think, Larissa, in the context of community groups. One of the perennial challenges we have is of course that every cent that gets spent gets audited by the Auditor-General's office, as do councils of course. So we have got to meet those benchmarks, but I am just wondering if you have got any ideas about how we might streamline the application process but still meet the public moneys test.

**The CHAIR:** Who would like to—

**Cr O'CONNOR:** Who are you directing that to?

**Mr MORRIS:** On the insurance/infrastructure question, anyone who has got a thought.

**Mr ALBICINI:** I suppose from the grants I have seen there is a lot of information being requested, so whether we can streamline some of the information that is being asked for. Some of it is repeated information about economic growth and all that sort of stuff, and you sort of say, 'Well, you have got that information anyway'. It is really more about what are you trying to achieve, how does it align with the actual grant requirements, and do you meet those requirements in how you actually appropriate it? So that is really what the

ask is. You are sort of asking for a business case submission on why we need the funding when you are probably nearly asking what is the expectations you are trying to deliver and how you are going to deliver it, and I think we would probably prefer to work in that space because that is what we are trying to do.

**Mr MORRIS:** Yes, but in the benchmarking process—I am just trying to think of the name of the program, the My Council data was developed.

**Mr ALBICINI:** Yes, My Council.

**Mr MORRIS:** There was a lot of work done at that point—I was Parliamentary Secretary for Local Government at the time—to try and reduce the reporting role. Has that started to creep back, or is a complexity starting to creep back, or did it not ever improve?

**Ms PRIEST:** The Local Government Energy Saver grants with Sustainability Victoria are a good example of something that was a relatively simple, easy process to go through, and the reporting requirements are not too resource intensive. So that is a good example of a grant that I think has worked quite well.

However, it is still the project management delivery of the grant that we struggle with when we are resource constrained. So having written a few grant applications in my time, over the last few weekends I prepared a Federal Government grant. The issues with that grant application is it is a highly competitive one, and it is also for a service that is only available to local councils but it is not a service that we normally deliver, and it is for an 18-month program to build community capacity to manage weeds and pests. Now that is a very difficult program to deliver with a certain outcome in 18 months, and that is very difficult to measure. So when you are sitting down and trying to understand how I am going to measure the effectiveness of a short-term project like that it gets quite difficult to meet those more ambiguous outcomes.

That is one that I struggled with; I know that is a Federal grant. But maybe also the length of the grants as well. Eighteen months is not enough time to deliver a program from concept through to reporting. Things need a little bit longer, particularly in regional areas where we have limited staff, to have a decent outcome. So maybe considering the length of time that projects run for is really important.

**Mr ALBICINI:** I would like to add to that. Amanda is right. In that particular grant the other issue that we face is that we want to support our community and apply for it, but the reality is that once we start that process and start that service then there is no more funding but there is an expectation to continue the service. So how do we do that? So we are working on the principle of trying to make—and that is where Amanda's point about making it longer would be good, because what we would work towards is to get the processes in place, get the frameworks in place to make it self-resilient moving forward. So therefore we can walk away from it and the community will actually continue leading it, but that takes some time to get that in place.

So there is that part, and the other part is with the timing of the grants. That is another thing we are facing with most grants is that you have nearly got to be shovel-ready to be able to implement the grant, and with councils in a rural area they sometimes struggle with that. So sometimes suddenly there is grant funding and there are all these things that they would like to do but they have not really prepared it as well as possible, so they just rush in to do it and then they find they cannot deliver it very well. What you probably want is a staged approach where you have got a year where you can actually ask for grants that maybe you want in two years time so you can plan for it properly. Like a two-tier process where your first tier is will you be potentially successful with the grant? Yes, then you can put the effort into planning to make it so it is applicable, or no, you are not. This grant that we were talking about, we were not even sure we would even get the grant or be one of the likely candidates. So we were debating whether we would resource it or not but we decided to go for it because we knew the community wanted us to. That was the issue.

**Cr BOWLES:** They were a bit cranky.

**Mr ALBICINI:** Yes, but that was okay because it is a worthwhile grant. So it is about the planning side of it and the ongoing support.

**Cr BENNETT:** I was going to make a point about the insurance time. I am not sure if the insurance people have asked councils. That is a really good question, and I will find that out. I know certainly in recent times we have had some really serious floods, so in a very small amount of time we had a one-in-1000-year flood and

then a few months later we had a one-in-every-2000-year flood. There were lots of people in Wodonga who assumed they would be covered under their insurance, but they were not. Then it came back onto council, our liability—that we should have been looking at land inundation and soil contraction because there has been such a long drought things have changed with soil. So it actually would be falling onto us. I am sure our insurance is going to be asking us questions soon because they are saying that they do not cover it, but it is our liability and our responsibility to be looking at those things.

**The CHAIR:** Particularly if it is council-controlled land that is expelling the water into private property and the infrastructure you potentially put in place—it might have been there for 30 or 40 years—was designed to a certain standard with, at that point, no consideration of additional capacity for that infrastructure given climate change.

**Cr BENNETT:** Exactly.

**Ms GREEN:** We heard evidence from other councils in another part of the state, and they raised an issue about when they are getting an insurance payout and the insurance says, 'You've got to build it back exactly as it was', and they are saying, 'Well, we want to build it better'. That sounds like you are getting mixed messages from the insurance industry too, so maybe that is something that we can pick up in our recommendations.

I actually had a question around off-grid power relief centres. But just before I go into that, I just want to congratulate Murrindindi shire for the work that you have done on the roadside fire mitigation management, the partnership that you have done with VicRoads, with the City of Whittlesea and the Shire of Nillumbik. Please tell your local laws guys they have just done a great job and it has just reduced stress in the community.

**Mr ALBICINI:** Thank you

**Ms GREEN:** I know they are really proud of it, and they should be.

I wanted to know which of you, with your relief centres or your neighbourhood safer places, has got off-grid power at the moment?

**Ms PRIEST:** None.

**Ms GREEN:** None. So that is another infrastructure question. I also just wanted to say Bushfire Recovery Victoria is now a permanent agency, so some of those issues are probably really good to take up with Ken Lay because no doubt, despite the name, they will be, I am sure, taking up preparedness stuff.

**Cr O'CONNOR:** Yes, we are meeting next week.

**Cr PRICE:** Can I just go back to the mental health. The other thing is we have an access and inclusion committee at our council, and we had that topic on the agenda for Monday in terms of, 'How do our people evacuate in those situations?', so with a wheelchair, with hoists, with all sorts of different requirements. I just put it to the committee members, who are quite representative, and their answer was, 'We don't know'. So we are under such severe threat right now, have been across this whole summer, and they still do not know. So in terms of the effect that that has on people's mental health, safety, all those sorts of things, that is just an enormous burden, and we cannot expect pop-up relief centres to be able to accommodate all those sorts of needs, so where do those people go?

**Ms GREEN:** That was actually a recommendation out of the bushfires royal commission to put onto councils in terms of having a vulnerable persons register.

**Cr BOWLES:** We have got one.

**Cr PRICE:** That is such a problem.

**Cr BOWLES:** My mum had a massive stroke four years ago; she has only got half a body. So I have to work out my bushfire strategy and then I have to work out the one with my mum.

**Cr PRICE:** Can I tell you how many people are on our vulnerable persons register?

**The CHAIR:** Yes.

**Cr PRICE:** So we have got 16 000 in our shire, we have 13 people on our vulnerable persons register.

**Cr O'CONNOR:** That meet the criteria.

**Cr PRICE:** Thirteen.

**Ms GREEN:** So that is a DHHS criteria?

**Cr PRICE:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** How many, in your belief, should be?

**Cr PRICE:** Very good question.

**Cr BOWLES:** Well, see, my mum is not on it because she lives in Yea.

**Cr PRICE:** That is right. So 13 is the number that we have to cater for.

**Cr O'CONNOR:** Basically, because we have looked into this ourselves, it is people who have no supports. So if they have any support, then they are not considered vulnerable. Well, hello, what do you do? And the other thing is, Danielle, we do not have the resources to deal with those people. Personally as a small council we do not have buses, we do not have hoists; we just do not have that stuff. So that then puts pressure on our local health services, and they are an aged care facility as well—you know, these multisites. They are dealing with in-house residents that in a crisis are obviously a high priority for them. So basically it is a huge hole. Nobody really is well equipped to deal with that situation, and they are the most vulnerable in our communities, and a lot of them can be in very remote outlying little towns, so they rely on their neighbours and their friends, and again we need support for that, properly funded and probably administered through DHHS—real support for looking after people that nobody else is equipped to do.

**Mr ALBICINI:** Can I just make a comment about the off-grid power and stuff, which is again another thing we need to think about because of climate change. But the experience at Murrindindi and the experience at Towong as well is that critical infrastructure, having that availability—like power and that—is critical in anything, both in day-to-day living but also during emergencies. But the amount of times that we do not have power when things happen—

**Cr BOWLES:** Even when things do not happen.

**Mr ALBICINI:** It is life threatening because we have had situations—even with the last storms—where we had no power. We could not communicate; we could not actually manage the event.

**The CHAIR:** If the power goes out, the Telstra tower goes.

**Mr ALBICINI:** Yes. We are actually manually opening our operations gate to be able to get equipment out to actually get the work done. It is just something to think about. It is really a state level sort of—

**Ms GREEN:** I am remembering how long it took to get power back to Kinglake after Black Saturday.

**Mr ALBICINI:** Yes.

**Cr BOWLES:** A lot of people are putting in, especially with new builds, smart houses, I think they are called. I would never go down that road. They cannot get in. They cannot get the car in the garage and they cannot open their front door or put their air conditioning on because it is all on smartphones.

**Mr ALBICINI:** It just gets back to that discussion about doing more work.

**Ms GREEN:** That sounds pretty dumb.

**Mr ALBICINI:** It probably gets back to that discussion about doing more work at the front end—about planning it better and being better prepared for these things and how to better manage it and get the right infrastructure in place, and the support.

**The CHAIR:** Just thinking it through, the types of communities that you represent are important to the Victorian tourism economy.

**Cr BOWLES:** Agriculture.

**The CHAIR:** They are important to the agriculture economy. They are also areas that are often reasonably sparsely populated, and they are also overlaid with areas where there is significant danger around bushfires and the like, and you have all experienced that over the last decade, yet you do not necessarily have the internal financial capital available to protect those communities. What level of support could be best provided by government to assist around those kinds of questions?

**Mr ALBICINI:** I think it is getting back to that front-end stuff—that would help, in my view; I do not know what everyone else thinks—to be better prepared and better planned and to build into infrastructure and the way we operate. Because I think we are really good at dealing with the issues when they happen, and then there seems to be funding coming around for that. We still need that, but it is that front-end stuff—like if we have got to put together an emergency management plan. We develop emergency management based on certain guidelines, but it is really that high-level sort of strategic planning about adaptation and resilience and how it embeds in what we do, and having that support to get that in place—it gives us clear goals and direction—and then the ongoing support to implement it. I do not know what everyone else thinks.

**Cr PRICE:** Yes.

**Cr BOWLES:** Well, I suppose from an infrastructure perspective—say for instance, in Yea; my little town—our guttering is 150 years old and it is about that big, and we have big storm events now which go into the Yea River. It floods all the shops. So in December now—for some odd reason, I do not know why—we are getting a lot of floods, which is great when it comes to the European wasps; it gets rid of them. But it floods all our shops, so then the council—we actually do a big sandbagging day and we give it all to the shops to actually sandbag those shops.

**Mr ALBICINI:** And that is State Government infrastructure.

**Cr BOWLES:** But we need bigger gutters.

**Mr ALBICINI:** Yes. So it is about getting those things in place.

**Ms GREEN:** Yes, it is on a VicRoads road.

**Mr ALBICINI:** It is on a VicRoads road, so we—

**Cr BOWLES:** Well, that is a mishmash.

**Mr ALBICINI:** That is just an example. And that is where I think the thought is if you have support at a regional base so that it could support all of us to get these things in place and to have an ongoing program to implement it, whereas at the moment we seem to be just doing the doing as it comes along.

**Cr BOWLES:** We are being reactive, not proactive.

**Mr ALBICINI:** Yes.

**Cr O'CONNOR:** And can I add: local governments are an entity in themselves, but we work with the CFA, with the SES, with the health services. We are just part of the matrix really. A lot of stuff falls under our umbrella, but funding for the CFA—one of the mental health issues right now that we are dealing with is that the volunteers are the businesspeople. They are exhausted. They are trying to work and be on the back of a truck and run a business that is failing. So they do not have adequate resources. I do not think we can keep

relying on volunteers to protect our communities into the future in extended, long periods of threat. I am not here as a CFA person, but clearly we need funding—we need more resources at every level—and that is why I am sitting here thinking that in terms of the bucket of money that is required it is enormous. There is no way of trying to fudge that. It is huge. So again whatever we can get at local government to help us with our resourcing will help you with that bigger picture stuff.

**The CHAIR:** Terrific. Look, I might just wind it up there. We have gone 25 minutes over, so we have given you plenty of time to present your evidence and for the Committee to ask questions. It has been a good session, so thank you. You are welcome to stay around for the next one.

**Witnesses withdrew.**