

**REPORT ON PROCEEDINGS BEFORE**

**SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE RESPONSE TO MAJOR  
FLOODING ACROSS NEW SOUTH WALES IN 2022**

**CORRECTED**

**At Jubilee Room, Parliament House, Sydney, on Wednesday 15 June 2022**

**The Committee met at 9:00.**

**PRESENT**

The Hon. Walt Secord (Chair)

The Hon. Mark Banasiak (Deputy Chair)

The Hon. Scott Barrett

The Hon. Catherine Cusack

Ms Cate Faehrmann

Ms Sue Higginson

The Hon. Rod Roberts

The Hon. Penny Sharpe

\* Please note:

[inaudible] is used when audio words cannot be deciphered.

[audio malfunction] is used when words are lost due to a technical malfunction.

[disorder] is used when members or witnesses speak over one another.



**The CHAIR:** Welcome to the final hearing of the inquiry into the response to major flooding across New South Wales in 2022. The inquiry is examining a number of issues relating to the preparation, coordination and response to the North Coast and western Sydney floods by the Government. I note that this Committee was established by the upper House of the New South Wales Parliament and is separate to the New South Wales Government's inquiry into the floods. I acknowledge the Gadigal people of the Eora nation, the traditional custodians of the land on which we gather today. I pay my respects to Elders past, present and emerging, and celebrate the diversity of Aboriginal peoples and their ongoing cultures and connections to the lands and waters of New South Wales. I also acknowledge and pay my respects to any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people joining us today.

Today we will be hearing from a number of government departments and agencies, including the Northern Rivers Reconstruction Corporation, the Northern NSW Recovery Coordinator, the State Emergency Service and Resilience NSW. While we have many witnesses in person with us today, some will be appearing via videoconference. I thank everyone for making the time to give evidence to this important inquiry. Before we commence, I would like to make some brief comments about the procedures for today's hearing, which is being broadcast live via the Parliament's website. A transcript of today's hearing will be placed on the Committee's website when it becomes available. In accordance with broadcasting guidelines, media representatives are reminded that they must take responsibility for what they publish from today's Committee proceedings.

While parliamentary privilege applies to witnesses giving evidence today, it does not apply to what witnesses say outside of their evidence at the hearing. I therefore urge witnesses to be careful about comments they may make to the media or to others after they complete their evidence. Committee hearings are not intended to provide a forum for people to make adverse reflections about others under the protection of parliamentary privilege. In that regard, it is important that witnesses focus on the issues raised by the inquiry's terms of reference and avoid naming individuals unnecessarily. All witnesses have a right to procedural fairness according to the procedural fairness resolution adopted by the House in 2018. If witnesses are unable to answer a question today and want more time to respond, they can take a question on notice. Written answers to questions on notice are to be provided within 21 days. If witnesses wish to hand up documents, they may do so through the Committee staff.

In terms of audibility of today's hearing, I remind Committee members and witnesses to speak into the microphone. As we have a number of witnesses in person and via videoconference, it may be helpful to identify who questions are being directed to and who is speaking. Finally, we would like everyone to turn their mobile phones to silent during the duration of the hearing. As I said earlier, this is our final day of hearings. We have sat seven days and so far we have received more than 60 submissions and, by the end of the day, we will have heard more than 50 witnesses from a range of communities including Wardell, Chinderah, Tumbulgum, Ballina, Lismore, Murwillumbah and Windsor in Sydney's north-west. More importantly, we held public forums in flood-affected communities where we heard firsthand under parliamentary privilege from those affected by the floods.

Admittedly this is a relatively new innovation for this Parliament, but it has proven worthwhile. In total, we heard more than 75 individual witnesses. We took heartbreaking evidence. We heard of people sleeping in cars and living in tents, with no income, for more than three months after the floods. There are still 1,500 homes or sites on the North Coast without full power. Mullumbimby still does not have full mobile phone service. We have also heard about the frustration of trying to get long-promised grants from the State Government—assistance long promised, but still not provided. We also heard the trauma of people being asked to retell repeatedly their personal stories to government officials in the hope of getting assistance. Finally, we hope to finalise our report, with findings and recommendations to the Government, on 9 August.

**Mr SHANE FITZSIMMONS**, Commissioner, Resilience NSW, sworn and examined

**Mr ROB ROGERS**, Commissioner, NSW Rural Fire Service, sworn and examined

**Dr KARL BRAGANZA**, National Manager Climate Services, Bureau of Meteorology, affirmed and examined

**Ms JANE GOLDING**, Manager Hazard Preparedness and Response, Bureau of Meteorology, sworn and examined

**Ms CARLENE YORK**, Commissioner, New South Wales State Emergency Service, sworn and examined

**Mr DANIEL AUSTIN**, Deputy Commissioner, New South Wales State Emergency Service, affirmed and examined

**Mr MARK HUTCHINGS**, Executive Director, NSW Maritime, sworn and examined

**Mr ALEX BARRELL**, Deputy Commissioner, Marine Rescue NSW, sworn and examined

**Mr STACEY TANNOS**, Commissioner, Marine Rescue NSW, sworn and examined

**The CHAIR:** Under the rules and regulations of this Committee, there is provision for an opening statement. Does anyone wish to make a short opening statement? If you do so, please raise your hand. We'll start with Ms York.

**CARLENE YORK:** I appear before the Committee today in my capacity as commissioner of the New South Wales emergency service, together with my deputy commissioner of operations, Daniel Austin. From late February to early April 2022, New South Wales experienced a catastrophic flood event. In some areas, it was to a scale that had never been seen before. The Wilsons River at Lismore reached a height of 14.4 metres, which is two metres above the previous record. The flooding was large scale and difficult to predict. Leading into 2022 many catchments in New South Wales were full and soils were saturated due to a La Niña event in March 2021 that led to widespread flooding in New South Wales. Then, from November 2021 there were 109 consecutive days of flooding in large parts of western New South Wales.

The 2022 flooding event significantly impacted multiple local government areas, including Ballina, Kyogle, Bellingen, Lismore, Byron, Richmond Valley, Clarence Valley, Tweed, Singleton, Central Coast and many more around the Sydney areas and down past Sydney to Wollondilly, Wollongong and Shellharbour. The service led the response to the flooding as the lead New South Wales government agency for these activities. Over 50 days of flood operations, the service responded to over 33,400 requests for assistance and more than 2,200 flood rescue activations, and received more than 72,000 calls to the State Operations Centre. Over 5,600 members of the service, both staff and volunteers, provided support to the event, which equated to around 490,000 personnel hours during those response activities. Tragically, 13 lives were lost and 4,055 properties deemed uninhabitable. A further 10,849 properties were assessed as damaged and 8,100 inundated with water.

The service was supported in the response efforts by personnel from the NSW Rural Fire Service, Fire and Rescue NSW, NSW Ambulance, New South Wales Volunteer Rescue Association, the NSW Police Force, NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, Marine Rescue NSW, Surf Life Saving, Resilience NSW and the ADF, and over 785 nationally coordinated interstate deployments. Many other government and non-government agencies also supported the effort in many ways. The service issued over 500 evacuation-related communications and over 1,500 flood bulletins. The service's webpage was visited 3.75 million times and the service's Facebook page reached over four million people.

Volunteers of the service are also residents of the community they serve. Many of the service's volunteers continue to serve the community despite the threat to and the loss of their own homes and possessions. The community also played a critical role in limiting the impact of the flooding through their actions in preparing, acting in accordance with warnings and orders, assisting their community through community rescue, distributing supplies and the clean-up. In preparing and responding to the flood events in February and March 2022, the service had regard to relevant emergency management procedures and responded effectively within its capability and available resources. The service has also implemented the major recommendations from previous inquiries that are within its control to implement.

The service welcomes this inquiry, as it does the New South Wales Government inquiry, as an opportunity to identify ways in which the service can improve its service to New South Wales communities and where we need support and further funding to do this. I'm very appreciative of the response efforts led by volunteers who are part of their community and who also experienced the impacts of flooding on their own properties. Despite being impacted themselves, the staff and volunteers of the service continued to turn up and help their community throughout this flood event.

**The CHAIR:** My first question is to Resilience NSW. Mr Fitzsimmons, evidence from individuals, community groups, not-for-profits and other government agencies criticise Resilience NSW, saying that Resilience NSW treated the fourth worst natural disaster in Australia as a nine-to-five job. What do you say to those criticisms?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** It's really disappointing to hear such comments and I reject the premise. The extraordinary toll that was occasioned—particularly in the Northern Rivers of New South Wales—and the scale and complexity of that operation necessitated everybody, including the Resilience NSW team, to work extraordinary hours. Our people right from the beginning, in the days preceding and the days of, were seeking to provide support and assistance despite limited access. I've had some staff sleeping in their vehicles overnight close to evacuation centres and other areas where they were providing support, or accessing and utilising scarce accommodation in the Northern Rivers. The entirety of our organisation has been engaged in one form or another, directly or indirectly supporting these unprecedented flood response relief and ongoing recovery efforts.

**The CHAIR:** Sir, what do you say to those criticisms? Have you in fact changed practices, the way you conduct business on the North Coast and in natural disasters? Have you copped those criticisms on the chin and said, "We can do better and this is what we'll do"?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** Mr Secord, I think I just explained it. I think the comments are really disappointing to hear.

**The CHAIR:** But they're heartfelt, sir.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** Absolutely. I appreciate that and I respect that 100 per cent. We should not—and I know you don't—underestimate the gravity of the displacement, disruption and trauma across so many people. We have never seen an event with the scale and concentration of damage and destruction and displacement like we've seen though, particularly, the Northern Rivers of New South Wales. By comparison, if we look at the events of the last couple of years, the fires that stretched from the Queensland border to the Victorian border—just under 2½ thousand homes destroyed. The floods of 12 months ago in the Hawkesbury-Nepean and the mid coast—something like 1,200 homes uninhabitable.

These flood events—we've got more than 4,000 homes that are uninhabitable and a significant concentration of people. Our teams have been working around the clock as much as they can. We're not a 24-hour organisation. We don't have thousands of personnel. We've been doing extraordinary hours. We've been running after-hours arrangements and we've seen the utilisation of partner agencies, partner organisations, non-government organisations and our government partners to assist as much as we can in providing support and assistance through the response phase and then, of course, in the recovery—

**The CHAIR:** Sir, I want to take exception with something you just said.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** You do?

**The CHAIR:** Resilience NSW should be a 24-hour-a-day organisation. Natural disasters can happen at any time. Now, that goes to the criticism of your organisation. What you just said—that goes to the heart of it.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** So let me clarify that—

**The CHAIR:** You said you're not a 24-hour-a-day organisation—

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** No. So—

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Sorry, Mr Chair. Can he just answer? Thank you.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** Let me clarify that. We're not resourced to staff 24 hours a day. I said that we maintain after hours, so we are active and engaged and have arrangements in place 24 hours a day. But with only a couple of hundred people, we just don't have the scale of resourcing or the role to sustain 24-hour operations during the response phase, particularly, of those events.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Thanks for coming in today. I think this will go to you, Ms York. Sorry, I'm not quite sure who to direct it to. We spent quite a lot of time in the last week or so on the North Coast and talked to many different people about what they've been through. It's safe to say it is a community still in trauma, I would argue. One of the things that has been raised consistently is just the lack of what the community described as authorised leadership during the disaster and continuing today. Whether it was rescue coordination, use of helicopter resources and even the set-up—who is in charge and who is looking after evacuation centres—the general reports that we have had are that it was extremely confused. No-one underestimates the gravity of the situation at the time. My understanding is that the SES is the lead agency in relation to when this is occurring. Can you take me through how it is that there is just such concern that no-one knew who was in charge?

**CARLENE YORK:** I'll start. First of all, I'm not in charge of evacuation centres. That is Shane Fitzsimmons. But we work with them in relation to establishing those evacuation centres, so I'll pick that up in part of my answer. It's correct, the NSW State Emergency Service are the lead agency in relation to floods, storms and tsunamis, and we have that power through legislation. We work under the emergency management procedures and guidelines with other emergency service agencies. We have a limited capacity, depending on our resources, but we rely on other agencies as well. So we train with other agencies in relation to flood rescue, incident command and control, but we are always the lead agency and always in control. I'm not sure why there is the confusion by the community. I can only say that sometimes they see a Fire and Rescue NSW boat coming, or there might be surf lifesaving personnel in the community. They are always under our control and direction and we are the lead agency.

What happens is we set up an incident command centre in a particularly affected area. You must remember these floods—this storm event started on the Central Coast, that's where the first fatality was, and it spread from the South Coast all the way to the Tweed border. There were a number of incident command centres set up for geographical areas along the east coast of New South Wales. We also have a State headquarters at Wollongong and we try and make sure that all our command and control responsibilities are at the local level as much as possible.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Sorry, Ms York. Yes, I appreciate that. That's straight out of the manual. But the issue here, which was consistently—whether it was local government, whether it was other organisations, the evidence to this inquiry was that no-one knew who was in charge and it was extremely confusing. Are you saying that that just wasn't the case? What has gone wrong here?

**CARLENE YORK:** Well, I don't think anything has gone wrong. We were always in charge—

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** You don't think anything has gone wrong?

**CARLENE YORK:** In relation to command and control. We were in charge, and we were tasking and deploying all resources out where it was needed where we were asked to assist the community—

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** We've had a number of reports where various organisations have said that they weren't called on to actually provide support, whether it's helicopter support, whether it's boat support, and that there was zero communication between what Marine Rescue was able to do—and I'll ask Marine Rescue about this in a minute. Yes, there was just complete confusion on the ground, and you think that that's just not a problem?

**CARLENE YORK:** No, I don't think that's correct. We go through the Rural Fire Service aviation desk, and they task us with the available helicopters that are there. We must remember, as I've said, this was across the whole east coast of New South Wales, so we had to deploy resources along the coast. Yes, not all helicopters, for example, were sent to Lismore. They wanted more but we also, as I said, needed those at the Central Coast, we needed them in the Hawkesbury-Nepean Valley and we needed them down at the Shoalhaven. Our resources were spread across. As different events passed in urgency and criticality, we moved resources around. During this event, we used every flood rescue operator available in Australia and New Zealand. There were none left to send to anywhere else in the State. We used over 700 or 800, as I said before, interstate personnel, but always under the control and deployment of NSW SES.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** How many SES volunteers do you have in the Lismore area?

**CARLENE YORK:** I'll have to take that on notice; I don't know the exact number.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** You don't know?

**CARLENE YORK:** When we talk about Lismore, we also work in clusters, so Northern Rivers is a cluster where they will go across—

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** If you can take on notice how many you have. But also, obviously, there are people that are on the books and there are people that are active, and then there were people who clearly were dealing with their own crisis. Could you break that down? We were told, for example, that only seven people were available at one point.

**CARLENE YORK:** No, that's not correct. We sent further resources up besides just what was there at the time, so I'll get those numbers.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Mr Tannos, we heard from some of your volunteers when we were in Wardell the other week, and the SES were not on the ground. Some local RFS and Marine Rescue volunteers really stepped up in that community during the disaster. Can you just take me through what requests you had during that time around boats and support, and generally what you and your organisation were asked to do?

**STACEY TANNOS:** Thank you. Was the question what we were tasked by SES? Is that what you were asking?

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** I'm asking that, but I'm also aware that your volunteers did a lot more than what they were asked to do, as well.

**STACEY TANNOS:** In many instances, I think you'll find with most agencies at a local level that they had arrangements in place with the local SES to assist wherever they could. Under the State flood plan we are a supporting agency to the SES, along with a number of other agencies, providing support—whatever we can do by way of boats, fuel trailers, logistics for moving people around, assisting in emergency operations centres, liaison officers in there or helping out in evac centres. In relation to what we actually did, I know that we had a couple of units up there that were very anxious, as they would be, having a boat in a shed and thinking, "Why can't we get out there and just put the boat in the water and help?" It's not as simple as that. The boats that we have—we have some 80-odd vessels up and down New South Wales. We have 45 units across New South Wales and one on Lord Howe Island, and 3,200 members. But even in the smallest of our boats, the draft of those vessels, which is the depth underwater—the minimum is 0.8 of a metre, and it can go up to 1.2 metres.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Sorry, just to stop you there, are you saying you didn't deploy those boats?

**STACEY TANNOS:** No, we did deploy boats. We deployed 27 assets altogether. That included three fuel trailers in that, and the rest were vessels and jet skis that we had that were appropriate for the type of waters and the conditions that we were in. If you take this into context, when I'm talking about the draft of the vessels, the floodwaters and not knowing the hazards that lay beneath, a classic example would be the Hawkesbury floods that happened 15 months before this flood event. We were asked by SES to provide some assistance, and we provided seven vessels which we thought were the most appropriate of the fleet that we had—so the smaller ones, 6½- or 7½-metre vessels, that you could trailer to the event. One of our vessels, during that evacuation process—

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Mr Tannos, thank you. I appreciate this, but I'm really just trying to get to what happened in February. Were you asked to deploy vessels in the Northern Rivers? When I say "vessels", I mean boats. How many did you deploy?

**STACEY TANNOS:** So 27 minus three.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Some of them are fuel trailers—three or four.

**STACEY TANNOS:** Three of them were fuel trailers, so 24.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** How many do you have in that area?

**STACEY TANNOS:** Do we know?

**ALEX BARRELL:** Yes, there are 13 vessels in our Northern Rivers region. We also deployed three vessels from Sydney and the mid North Coast to assist, with vessel-trained crew. We also deployed the three fuel trailers, as Commissioner Tannos has said, with 12 trained vessel crew to assist, and that was a direct request from the SES at the time to send to Lismore.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** When was that made?

**ALEX BARRELL:** My recollection and my notes say that was made on 1 March.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Three days after the flood.

**ALEX BARRELL:** That was on 1 March.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Sorry, first, gotcha.

**The Hon. MARK BANASIAK:** I am just picking up from some questions from Ms Sharpe. Ms York, you said that Resilience NSW is responsible for managing the evacuation centres, but I draw your attention to the New South Wales Government's own State Flood Plan, which is dated 2 December 2021. I have just downloaded it this morning so I assume it is the most current. Page 18 actually says the SES is in control of the evacuation of affected communities, including the major evacuation centres. There is no mention of Resilience NSW in that section of the document. I put to you that if your own plan doesn't tell people what Resilience NSW is supposed to be doing or managing the evacuation centres, how do you expect things to be done in a coordinated fashion? Is this the most up-to-date plan?

**CARLENE YORK:** Yes.

**The Hon. MARK BANASIAK:** If the most up-to-date plan makes no reference of Resilience NSW's role, how does Resilience NSW know what it's supposed to do and how does everyone else in the system know what it's supposed to do if the plan is not up to date? I am assuming everyone is operating from this plan.

**CARLENE YORK:** That's correct. In an event, we will identify the areas that are required for evacuation warnings where possible and evacuation orders. We do that in close consultation with other agencies. The centre is identified by us and the emergency operations controller—where that will be—and there is a pre-planned list of those evacuation centres. But they all have to be identified in light of the particular circumstances that they are safe to get to, that they are out of the flood waters and that they are accessible by the community. We work with Resilience NSW in relation to the resourcing available and food and other things that are available in those evacuation centres. Would you like to add to that?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** Are you happy for me to provide some clarification there?

**The Hon. MARK BANASIAK:** That would be great, particularly what exactly Resilience NSW does with the evacuation centres because we have heard mixed reviews that you were there, you weren't, you were in the way, you weren't.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** Commissioner York is accurate in terms of how local evacuation centres are authorised and enacted. It's the lead combat agency in the circumstances of the flood. It's the State Emergency Service working with the local emergency operations controllers, which are the local police commanders. They determine the evacuation centres through their local emergency management plan, and for the Northern Rivers and Lismore there is a range of pre-identified locations. As a matter of fact, the Southern Cross University was activated through that local planning instrument on the twenty-seventh, for example—the evening before—in anticipation of what might come in the coming days.

As per the Welfare Services Functional Area plan, which describes the management and coordination of evacuation centres, evacuation centres are activated at the local level and are resourced and managed by DCJ personnel and police, particularly where they're escalated to a major evacuation centre. Police take charge of management and operations, and with the Lismore Southern Cross University site, that was formally progressed as a major evacuation centre. The other provisions in the flood plan and the sub-plan refer to sustenance and relief and those sorts of things that are provided through those resources. Where the resourcing goes beyond the local capacity of resources—so they identified typical threshold numbers of several hundred people that could be managed through those arrangements—and where it needs to be escalated to a major centre, police take a lead in command and control arrangements.

Our role is under the Welfare Services Functional Area arrangement of the emergency management arrangements, where we take a State policy setting, training and coordination role for those local resources. For example, in the past 12 or 18 months, something like 1,500 additional personnel from the DCJ were trained for resourcing and mobilisation into these areas. When Southern Cross University particularly was identified as being overwhelmed in terms of the numbers that would normally be the case for evacuation arrangements in that area, we, along with a range of other organisations—defence, fire services and others—were brought in to support the police and the DCJ with some of that resourcing. Our role is principally through that Welfare Services Functional Area coordination at the State level, with service delivery through the local plans, the lead combat agency, the EOCONs and, of course, the DCJ.

**The Hon. MARK BANASIAK:** By "additional support"—obviously when there was a need—what do you mean? What does that look like? Because we had evidence to say that no-one saw you and then we also had evidence that when you were there, you were more in the way and a hindrance. How many of your 105, I think—you mentioned a couple of hundred—how many of those staff were in recovery centres and what specifically were they tasked with doing?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** Are you talking recovery centres or evacuation centres?

**The Hon. MARK BANASIAK:** Sorry, evacuation centres. Let's start with evacuation centres. How many of your staff were in evacuation centres once you realised there needed to be a surge, and what exactly were they doing?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** When the request for surging arrangements came through the DCJ and police arrangements at the State level, we formalised that request to upgrade the Lismore evac centre to a major centre, which would come under the command and control arrangements of police and the DCJ. They had the ability to access and utilise other resources to assist, i.e. people and non-government organisations. So there's a range of key organisations that are identified to assist with the provision of food and cash and other arrangements in those evac centres. I'll get the exact numbers for you. But when we could gain access, including our staff who were based on the North Coast—there were a number of days initially where people were isolated and couldn't

get access. But I'm confident that by the time we hit Thursday, Friday or Saturday, we had people from different parts of the State arriving to assist in a range of evacuation centres, as well as head office.

**The Hon. MARK BANASIAK:** I need to clarify—you didn't touch on specifically what your staff were doing.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** It can be anything that the local managers of those evac centres are looking for assistance in, whether it's logistics, triaging, sorting with organisation and management, welfare service and provision, or supporting the DCJ and non-government organisations. It can be a range of different tasks based on what's required at a particular centre.

**The Hon. MARK BANASIAK:** At that point, did they fall under the control of the centre manager?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** Yes. Local evac centre managers are predetermined and identified through the local planning instruments and are invariably DCJ personnel. We will have the DCJ in later, so we can talk about that in detail. They nominate them and then they have an ability to scale up and mobilise resources around the State. But we've got to remind ourselves that more than 80 evacuation centres were established over that period, with more than 8,000 people registered. We know registrations don't capture everybody, because there are a lot of people who don't want to be registered and caught and simply don't get captured. Resources—when I say resources, I mean people—and other logistical support were spread across a lot of different evacuation centres. The Lismore one particularly was escalated in the early days, with the volume and complexity, to what we designate a major evacuation centre, which comes under the leadership and control of the local police.

**The Hon. MARK BANASIAK:** Perhaps on notice you could give us the spread of your staff across those centres.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** Say that again, sorry.

**The Hon. MARK BANASIAK:** Perhaps on notice, when you're giving us the total number, you could give us the geographical spread.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** Or provide it later today.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** I have lots of questions. I will try to be specific with my questions and, if possible, if you could be specific with the answers. Mr Hutchings, how many rescues did NSW Maritime services perform on the Wilsons River and on the Tweed River?

**MARK HUTCHINGS:** I haven't got any details about rescues. I just want to make it very clear about NSW Maritime's role. We are not an accredited marine rescue agency. We are a support organisation under the subplan. It was well articulated by Commissioner Tannos that we have very similar boats that are not designed to work in swift water.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Sorry, can I just thank you for that. I have quite a few questions. I just want to understand, did Maritime perform any rescues at all during the emergency?

**MARK HUTCHINGS:** We did 131 evacuations of separate people, mainly in up the Northern Rivers.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Which river was that?

**MARK HUTCHINGS:** The details I've got is the Clarence and the Richmond.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Right, so not in the Wilsons or the Tweed?

**MARK HUTCHINGS:** Not that I'm aware of, but I can take that on notice and get back to you.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** The belief up there is that offers were made and they were rejected on the grounds that, apparently, people weren't trained to perform those rescues. If you could just specifically address that allegation.

**MARK HUTCHINGS:** I wouldn't consider an allegation based on what our role is. Our role is not a marine rescue agency. Our staff, whilst they're experienced mariners, are not trained to operate in swift water or to do swiftwater rescues. They simply are not trained to do that and nor are the vessels suitable to do so. We were requested to support, as we are under the subplan, and we got involved in the movement of stores for emergency service, as per the plan, as per our role.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Sir, with respect, we had surf clubs sending boys out on surfboards to do rescues in Lismore. They weren't trained to do that. So if everybody took that attitude, who would have done the rescues in Lismore and Murwillumbah?

**MARK HUTCHINGS:** Operating in floodwaters is the most dangerous, perilous thing that you can do. As a government agency, you would not recommend nor would you deploy untrained staff in inappropriate vessels into that environment. We have a role—

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** What about the jet skis?

**MARK HUTCHINGS:** The same would apply for a jet ski.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** So when offers were made by locals were they rejected by the SES or by Maritime bureaucracy?

**MARK HUTCHINGS:** We don't have a bureaucracy, but we responded to each and every request, as per the arrangements, through the Emergency Operation Centres, to conduct roles and requests in line with our role under the subplan. In fact, we had a number of staff that lost their homes as well and continued to perform their role. Our role is to ensure that we do logistical support, do evacuations where it is safe to do so and also move fuel, medivacs et cetera, which we did extensively during the course of it. We also lost 610 AtoNS, which are navigational aids. We also looked at and responded to sunken vessels, which is our role. Each and every time we were requested, we did what we were requested to do.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** In relation to my question, which was the rescues, I think you have answered that. Thank you very much. The Bureau of Meteorology is here. The weather system that caused this flooding was very severe, with major, unprecedented flooding in Brisbane. Plus, There were locals in the catchment who were trying to warn everybody that the flooding in the catchment was unprecedented and that water was all headed for Lismore. Why did the bureau fail to predict the extent of the flooding?

**JANE GOLDING:** Starting from September, the bureau was advising the community and the State Government that we were looking at a season with above average rainfall and a really heightened risk of significant flooding. So those messages continued right up through and into February, and they were triggered, mainly, as we were seeing La Niña develop in the Pacific Ocean. On the Wednesday preceding the floods, we had another system move through that we were warning for. There were severe weather warnings out—like a moderate flood watch was out for that system—and we did see enough rainfall from that system to cause some flash flooding and also to raise the river levels up, which meant that when the following system came that it was on elevated water levels. The system in question, that came through on the twenty-seventh and the twenty-eighth. From 26 February, the bureau was issuing severe weather warnings, major flood watches and major flood warnings for this system. Words that were being used were "life-threatening flash flooding", "rapid river rises", "major significant flooding". Media releases, press conferences—

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Sorry. With respect, you're not suggesting that you did predict?

**JANE GOLDING:** No, sorry.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Right. My question is really about why it wasn't predicted. We're trying to learn lessons.

**JANE GOLDING:** On a broad scale, and in the lead-up, the signals were there in the atmosphere and we were communicating that there was a heightened risk for a significant flood. It's very difficult to predict river heights in days ahead of a flood. Quite often it all depends on where the rain will fall. The bureau doesn't just look at one form of guidance when we're devising the forecast; we will look at several. Quite regularly, the guidance that we're looking for are the same as our sister agencies internationally. Up until the morning of the twenty-sixth, all of the computer model guidance was taking that system from Brisbane and tracking it out into the Tasman Sea.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Can I ask you about the rain gauges and the data that you rely on, coming out of the catchment? First of all, whose responsibility is it to maintain those gauges? The stories we hear are that some were destroyed by bushfires two years earlier and not repaired; Lismore tried to get funding to have more gauges, and that was refused by a New South Wales agency. This is all information that you rely on, so I'm just really trying to get a feeling for why such critical infrastructure, given warning of an emergency—what is the governance around that? Is it good enough? Why isn't it good enough? What do we need to change?

**JANE GOLDING:** The governance around that is defined in an agreement called the intergovernmental agreement. There is split ownership, and you can access that agreement through the webpage. It's something that came out of the Chloe Munro review of the bureau in 2011, which really defined—

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Split ownership?

**JANE GOLDING:** Split ownership between local, State and Federal governments. There are 1,500 flood data assets in New South Wales. Of those, the bureau owns 885.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** I'm not putting this on you, but this just sounds ludicrous for such important infrastructure that it would have a three-way partnership. It ends up with nobody being responsible, does it?

**JANE GOLDING:** The responsibilities lie with the asset owner. The bureau is responsible for maintaining the assets that the bureau owns, and there are 885 assets in New South Wales.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** This is for both the SES and the BOM. The situation that the Committee heard unfold in Broadwater and Woodburn, in particular, was incredibly frightening. We heard from locals who were relying on messages from the SES about the level of floodwater that was horrifically wrong. Why was that information so wrong? They were getting text messages hours later, if they were getting anything at all, and the Woodburn community was assured that it would be minor flooding. What happened there, Ms York?

**CARLENE YORK:** We work in partnership with the bureau, so I think Jane will probably add some value to that question as well. We take the information from the Bureau of Meteorology. They predict the weather conditions as well as use that information from gauges and other sources, as Jane has said, in relation to what effect that will have on the river system. If there is a chance of flash flooding—which, obviously, as its name is, a little bit unpredictable, depending on where the weather falls—we then turn that information that we get from the bureau into warnings that go out to the public. We do that in a variety of ways, whether it is text messages, radio, television, doorknocking—any way we can get out to that community. You talk about those two areas. They significantly affected SES as well. We lost both of our unit premises in those towns. Many of our volunteers lost their homes as well. But they went out to help the community. That's how we put the information out: We take the information from the bureau, we transfer that into communication and warnings out to the public.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** You're basically blaming the BOM for that so I will go straight to Ms Golding. How did that fail so horrifically in getting the right information to people who desperately needed it during this flood event?

**JANE GOLDING:** I will say there was a major flood watch out for the Richmond River issued on the twenty-sixth and the twenty-seventh.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** The Committee has heard—and I'm specifically asking about this—that the people of Woodburn and Broadwater were listening to messages from the SES and looking at the BOM. Pretty much right to the last minute there was no mention of advice to Broadwater and Woodburn to watch out for possible moderate flooding on the Monday night. So the question is specifically about what went wrong with Broadwater and Woodburn.

**JANE GOLDING:** I don't think Broadwater is a formal forecast location on the Richmond River.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** That's an issue, isn't it?

**JANE GOLDING:** That could be a lesson that's come out of this event. There are a lot of lessons for all agencies, including the bureau.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** I get that it's probably an issue of resourcing, and I certainly hope that the bureau is requesting more resources to be able to do this accurately. But in regard to assessing what went wrong, please reassure this Committee that there is an issue with the fact that some communities can't get any information at all about flooding.

**JANE GOLDING:** I would say that what we need to do is review the forecast locations in our flood warning service. That is something that we would do with the local government and the SES.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** Is that being planned? It's more than three months since this horrific flood event, of course.

**JANE GOLDING:** We haven't had a request come through to look at it from either local or State government yet. But there is a process for that to occur.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** So the State Government has to request that?

**JANE GOLDING:** Or local government.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** The bureau can't take the initiative and say, "This was an issue"?

**JANE GOLDING:** We're looking at a wide—yes, we can, to answer the question directly. We can take the initiative and we can approach local and State government, yes.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** Ms York, I ask about the Mullumbimby evacuation centre. Why did the SES issue an evacuation notice telling people to go to that evacuation centre—the ex-services club in

Mullumbimby—when nothing was ready for them? Nobody knew about it; nobody was there. How did that happen? People were leaving their flooded houses and being told to go to the evacuation centre by the SES. Nobody was there. When they got there, there were no resources, people or staff. So people went back to their flooded houses. They were advised by the SES to go to the evacuation centre. It wasn't an evacuation centre.

**CARLENE YORK:** I don't know the precise timings. I will have to take that one on notice for you and get back to you with the information.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** But you, in your position, and the deputy commissioner as well, haven't heard at all about this issue?

**DANIEL AUSTIN:** If I may? It was around about a quarter past three in the afternoon on the twenty-seventh that an evacuation warning was issued for people to start to prepare to leave in the location of Mullumbimby. As the conditions very rapidly deteriorated overnight—as we've already heard, the conditions escalated significantly. The expectation was that the evacuation order and evacuation centre wouldn't be required until the day of the twenty-eighth. It was in the middle of the night that the conditions deteriorated to such that people started to need to be evacuated. So the evacuation order was issued, with the intent to get people to start moving, knowing that some preparation had already been done at that point in time.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** Can I just check who the SES talked to or communicated with? You issue an evacuation notice to go to an evacuation centre. What else do you do in terms of making sure that evacuation centre has people there and is set up? Did something fail?

**DANIEL AUSTIN:** I am aware that there were discussions with the emergency operations centre on the day prior, on the day of the twenty-seventh, to start to look to prepare the centre—

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** Who's at the emergency operations centre? Who are those people? I don't mean names. Who do they work for?

**DANIEL AUSTIN:** They are across all the services and all the partner agencies involved, including local government and State government agencies.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** Have you identified where the failure was? Something didn't occur in terms of the communication. There was a communication breakdown. Where did that happen?

**DANIEL AUSTIN:** I think, as I started saying before, the issue came about because of the rapid speed of rise. The expectation was that, sometime during the day on the twenty-eighth, the triggers would be met. However, the triggers were met during the middle of the night, significantly before the expectation that that centre was going to be required to actually open.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Ms York, we heard that messaging was sent out through the SES, asking or advising people not to go out in their own vessels to conduct rescues. Why might that have been the case?

**CARLENE YORK:** Thank you for the question. I think there's been some evidence. This is an extremely dangerous and perilous situation and event. As a commissioner of the SES, I must ensure that people are as safe as possible. Not only is there rubble, refuse, very swift flowing water, the contaminated water—going out is very dangerous. I have an obligation to try and keep the community safe, no matter what—

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** There are people out there too.

**CARLENE YORK:** I understand the community went out. I don't think we're ever going to stop Australians helping each other.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** What would have happened if they hadn't gone?

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Can I just continue down my questions, if that's alright? I guess the question is to you as well, Mr Hutchings—not sending untrained people out in unsuitable vessels. What might have been the ramifications if they did go out and something went wrong?

**MARK HUTCHINGS:** You're talking about one of my staff?

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Yes.

**MARK HUTCHINGS:** I'll potentially be charged and before the Coroners Court. We have a responsibility as a government agency.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** You would be personally?

**MARK HUTCHINGS:** Personally, under the work health and safety. There is no way that you would recommend or deliberately send staff in inappropriate boats, untrained, into that environment. I've been involved in this environment for nearly two decades. I still consider this to be the most dangerous. But Aussies will do what Aussies will do. It was, from what I could see, the circumstances that come on very quickly. Others would have more detail around that than I. But, certainly, you would never do it, absolutely never do it.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Is that formalised? Have you got a formal protocol for that? I'll ask the same question for SES and also RFS on this one.

**MARK HUTCHINGS:** Absolutely.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Is that legislated?

**MARK HUTCHINGS:** Under work health and safety, most certainly. Those CEOs are responsible to ensure the safety of their staff, particularly in light of the unprecedented levels of that flood. I went up there on the second. I went out onto the Clarence. I had a look. It was like looking out to sea. The pictures did not do it justice. I've never seen anything like it. From a CEO's point of view, from my point of view, we can't put our staff into that circumstance unless they are trained and in appropriate vessels. End of story.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Just a one-word answer: Do RFS and SES have similar legislated responsibility?

**CARLENE YORK:** Yes, we do. I know it's one word, but also, when Mark is talking about staff—volunteers are staff, in accordance with the work health and safety legislation, so the same applies to any volunteer as well.

**ALEX BARRELL:** Can I just add a point to that? I think it's important that the Committee understands this. The nature of the vessels that we operate at Marine Rescue and NSW Maritime are the same—and SES, to a certain extent—regulated vessels under the national law for domestic commercial vessels. With that sits the safety management system, and a certificate of operation and requirements for people that operate those vessels to be trained. The nature of training and the certificate of operation are aligned to the activity of that vessel for what it was built for. That comes back to the requirement under the work safe legislation within New South Wales but also the national law. As Commissioner Tannos was trying to get to in his first answer, Marine Rescue was under investigation during these floods from the floods that occurred 12 months earlier, where one of our vessels rolled over in the Hawkesbury River. That was certainly a consideration through this in terms of the deployment of our vessels to make sure they were done in accordance with the national law.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** I acknowledge the interjection. We thank and acknowledge the people who went out and did that. Thankfully they did that, but I think it's important to have on record why you were unable to do some of that stuff. I will go back to the comments before about the staffing duration for Resilience NSW, Commissioner. Are there rules and regulations that state that after someone has been away from home for two weeks that they will be stood down for two or three days, or whatever we heard?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** Yes, absolutely. It's the same operating environment—health and safety, fatigue management guidelines. Whilst I am immensely proud of all the work that my staff have been doing over these last few months, particularly in extraordinary circumstances and situations, one of our biggest challenges is trying to get them to stick with fatigue management guidelines. I can recall many times when I've been on the phone in the middle of the night or at two, three or four in the morning with my team working to resolve and sort through issues with agencies. But having them in centres—whether it be recovery centres, evacuation centres, emergency operation centres, State headquarters or whatever it is—rotating people around on extended rosters and extended shifts, trying to keep them limited with shift duration and consecutive days on shifts, and time away from home, it is a significant and legislative responsibility to try to get that balance right between service and delivery, safety and fatigue management, and risk settings.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Obviously some rules were broken throughout the rescue—thankfully. As you said, people went out in boats who weren't wearing life jackets. I'm sure there were unregistered vessels. Are there other rules that we can break, or look at settings where in a disaster we can break some rules so we can send out vehicles and work longer hours?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** I know from my previous role, and Commissioner Rogers will be able to talk about this, but the pragmatism is that across the agencies we recognise that in the initial phase of response and crises things like fatigue management and shift lengths are invariably broken. But our effort is to seek to minimise that as much as possible. It is okay while nothing goes wrong, but if something goes wrong and it's fatigue or overexposure that triggers something that has a catastrophic outcome—the example that Marine Rescue identified that they were under investigation for is that they had just rescued a couple of civilians, put them in the

boat and that boat capsized. Fortunately, they were able to retrieve the crew and the people that were evacuated. When it's going okay, it's wonderful and we get it. But if something goes horribly wrong then, absolutely, the loss or the consequence to the individuals and their families is one thing, but as CEOs and senior officials overseeing an organisation there are very serious implications under health and safety legislation.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Maritime services is funded by the public to perform emergency rescues. These are two river-based maritime services, with boats. You may have visited Lismore and seen the water but what you didn't hear were the thousands of people in darkness, on roofs, screaming for their lives and sending messages because they believed they would die, while a publicly funded rescue service down the road said it couldn't help because their staff are not trained. Is that some sort of failure to have not been prepared to perform those rescues on that community, where people were literally dying while publicly funded boats sat in sheds because of occupational health and safety failure to train people to perform those rescues?

**MARK HUTCHINGS:** Is that—

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** And are they trained to do those rescues now or is it still the same situation that you wouldn't help?

**The CHAIR:** Ms Cusack, let him answer the question.

**MARK HUTCHINGS:** The question is to NSW Maritime. As I articulated earlier, of course we acknowledge the terrible trauma and devastation that occurred on the Northern Rivers. But NSW Maritime is not a rescue-accredited organisation; we are not funded to do rescues. We are a boating education and compliance agency, and we primarily do that role. We do at times get involved in rescues when we are johnny-on-the-spot, but our staff don't have appropriate boats and our staff are not trained to do that, nor is it our legislative role to do so. I can assure you that if it was then that would be taking place. But to give some assurance, we do have very capable professional mariners who operate those boats. They are on those rivers day in and day out. I will be seeking support from the SES to get training to allow us to be on those rivers. I have also instructed my fleet management area to have a look at—we also have a pollution controller role, so we are thinking about putting together some purpose-built boats that will allow us to get us into inundated areas. But there will not be a time where we will be training our staff to do swiftwater rescues. They are extremely specialised and extremely dangerous.

I have not received any reports that we were directly requested to rescue people on roofs during the course of these floods. In fact, in line with our role, on each and every occasion that we were requested to do our supporting role—evacuations where it was safe to do so—we did so. Not only that, from the last floods we have also put some money into building an operations centre at Coffs Harbour, which cannot be affected by floods. That will be open to other marine agencies to assist with localised support. We have also upgraded our State marine incident control system. We have seen what has occurred in these unprecedented ways, but we will make sure that we will work very closely with the other agencies to harness the capability that is within NSW Maritime. But in answer to your question: one, I am not aware of those requests; and, two, nor is that our role at this stage.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Everyone keeps talking about how unprecedented it was. Given what we know now, with people in boats and people sending messages to their families elsewhere, getting people to rescue them, will you seek in the review of this entire process to be able to use every public asset that we have at times like this? Would you be seeking to do that or are you seeking to stay in your lane?

**MARK HUTCHINGS:** No, I would be seeking to tap into the capability where it is safe to do so. We have a specific role—we have a role. We work as a supporting agency. But where there is capability, potentially, for us to do more in that space, I think that is something worthwhile investigating.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** But if it happened tomorrow, nothing would be done differently?

**MARK HUTCHINGS:** No.

**Ms SUE HIGGINSON:** Could we go back to the night of the twenty-seventh, and particularly the warning system. I am from Lismore. My family were in tinnies rescuing people the following morning. Many people who live in North and South Lismore listen to the warnings, watch the BOM and press refresh maybe every eight seconds. Up until the evening, there were notifications that there was going to be a flood. People were to either evacuate or activate their flood plan. People in Lismore, particularly in the north and south, are experts on flood plans. They know their floor level to the millimetre, they know the water level, they know what happens. At about 10.00 p.m. that night the warnings started to change a little bit. I may have the hours a bit wrong. We were told the levee would break. We were told that we were going to experience something like 2017.

The difference between 2017 and 5.00 a.m. on the morning of the twenty-eighth was the difference between being on your veranda watching the floodwaters or being on or in your roof sending your last messages

to your family that you were going to die, that you may not survive—and many people let their animals go because they just could not get them on their roofs. What actually went wrong in that part of the warning system? How do we get that better? That is to the BOM and the SES, given the SES put out the warnings being informed by the BOM. And if I can ask two questions, then my second question is around getting in tinnies in the morning. What are we going to do to recalibrate our risk matrix on that morning when we're watching people with tinnies, with different vessel draught, literally deeper boats, but still going out and rescuing their friends off roofs? So the warning system first, please.

**JANE GOLDING:** The forecasts were devised up until Sunday evening, based on the evidence that was available at the time. Computer modelling available at the time wasn't forecasting those extraordinary rainfall rates that we received. The headwaters of the Wilsons—I think Doon Doon got around 775 millilitres in the 24 hours, and a lot of that fell in a lot less than that. So the flood forecasts are based on a lot of different inputs, and forecast rainfall is one of them. The forecast rainfall didn't pick up the extremity of the event. And, as I was mentioning before, there are lots of different forms of computer models that we looked at. None of them really picked up—none of them picked up 775 millilitres in the headwaters of the Lismore. The upper range for the Northern Rivers was between 200 and 400 millilitres.

As the rain started falling and kept falling at these extremely intense rates over the headwaters of the Wilsons up at Doon Doon, that's when the forecasts were updated to reflect, you know, an increase in risk, and the rain just kept falling. I mean, there are limitations to meteorology and there are limitations to flood forecasting. I think there's a misconception out there that it's a perfect—well, I actually don't think there's a misconception. It's not a perfect science and we can only predict the future based on the evidence that we have available at the time, and up until the evening the evidence was by the computer model guidance. Once the observations came in around these extraordinary rainfall rates that were being received up around Doon Doon, that's when the forecasts were increased. In the afternoon we were liaising closely with the SES and we were talking about a levee breach during Monday at Lismore.

Once that rain started falling at those intense rates, we realised that levee breach would be earlier. It came in at three o'clock on Monday morning. That was not the timing that we were considering. We were also considering, based on the rainfall guidance that we were looking at from the computer models, that maybe a possible higher end might be around 12.1 metres, so plans were put in place based on that. But, as the rain started falling, and kept falling, the evidence that was available from upstream and this volume of water that was moving down through the headwaters and down through Lismore, was it would be a lot worse than that. So it wasn't really until eight—I mean, throughout the rain kept falling, so we knew that further river rises were possible. Those words were put on warnings and once we could get some confidence in the height, which it's not—it's quite complex how rivers behave, so that's why we can't really do that with any confidence a long way in advance.

**Ms SUE HIGGINSON:** Is there a better system if there was actual on-ground local knowledge feeding into what's happening up the catchment? I mean, that's something that people have been presenting evidence to.

**JANE GOLDING:** Yes.

**Ms SUE HIGGINSON:** That they could or they would like to be able to ring in and tell the SES what's happening up at the Wilsons et cetera—those points. I mean, is this something—or, during the next flood, are we going to be here again, just going through the same charade of, "It's an imperfect science and we don't know how to do it"? Because, if that's the case, we need to know that's what we're going to expect next time.

**JANE GOLDING:** What we do following the floods is we review the data infrastructure around the catchments to see if there's a need for more gauges, and we also will review classifications—whether the classification of "major" is really the right level on the river and is conveying the impact that "major" brings with it.

**Ms SUE HIGGINSON:** Are you aware that some of those gauges weren't working? Is that part of the problem, would you say, that those failed gauges—

**JANE GOLDING:** The gauges that we had access to for the Wilsons up until—the automatic weather station failed at around 3.00 a.m. in the morning. That's not one that's used for the riverine flooding. And the one in Lismore failed at around, was it two? Sorry, I can't remember the times. It was during the day, though. It was during the afternoon, I think. So I'm aware those failed. I'm not aware of any others in the area that got in the way of producing the forecast. There's a bit of redundancy already built in. But part of the review process is to really look at whether that's sufficient, and that is across all parts of the warnings. Local, State and Federal—we will be looking at and we are looking at.

**Ms SUE HIGGINSON:** And to the risk matrix and the tinnies?

**CARLENE YORK:** There are a number of issues that you've raised. I think we'll all reflect differently in the future and act differently as a result of these floods. These are unprecedented. I hear what you say about the Lismore residents. They have had a lot of floods. They're very used to them, and they make decisions based on what they know happened in the past. This was an event that went much higher and much quicker than we have ever seen before. One of the things that the SES do—the most important thing—is try and make sure that people do evacuate. We know that in the past they've been able to evacuate upwards, and that is now in question. So we have quite a few programs that we're rolling out—have started to roll out already and will in the future—about making people more aware of their decisions and their risk. We try and put out those warnings in the daylight hours before the night comes. We've spoken about this particular night where we have put out the warnings ready for the next day, but it came much quicker.

Importantly, we've come out of a period of drought. The dams were all at 100 per cent. So that is one strategy that is removed from us—that there is a capacity to delay the water flow down the rivers because the dams can pick up a lot of that overflow. That wasn't the case in this particular flood. We have a national project for the Australian Warning System, which is looking at improving our warning systems out to not only residents but any travellers, and having consistent messaging and icons across the whole of Australia. So, for example, in the Northern Rivers, a lot of people come down from Queensland. We have different symbols, different warnings and different communications out to the community to what they have in Queensland. As SES, we have developed a new app for the community so that they can get in and get more timely and more accurate information, and that's due to be rolled out later this year. So that has been funded.

As I say, we didn't know what was coming and, in fairness to the BOM, they just didn't know where the rain was going to fall, and it fell in the most tragic places for the community to be able to respond. Often when they then need to evacuate, the roads are cut and obviously the storms are still going, so sending the boats out is quite difficult. Sending helicopters up into the sky is impossible, and we rely on the pilot's decision. They are the deciding factor in relation to whether helicopters go up. So all of these things impacted. We need to raise the bar about what is the worst case scenario for a flood in these areas into the future, and that will be taken into account in our decision-making, our warnings and our information that goes out to the public.

**The CHAIR:** The Hon. Rod Roberts has ceded his questions to Catherine Cusack, if Ms Cusack wants to resume.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** I wanted to ask about a new phase of the emergency that occurred when the M1 was closed due to flooding. Is that part of the SES' management? Obviously communications were cut. The road was cut, so we had a fuel shortage. Nobody could get any money or pay with anything. Who actually takes control of that situation? Is that part of the SES' and Resilience's responsibility, or is it somebody else?

**CARLENE YORK:** Just so I'm clear on the question—as in closing the road?

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Yes. The road closed so the region then had a fuel and a food shortage. For example, Yamba couldn't be supplied with food for a week. We had petrol queues for miles and people couldn't access any money so—what I'm saying is: Who manages the chaos of these very cut-off communities trying to access basics?

**CARLENE YORK:** During the response phase, it's the SES. Obviously the SES has a broad range of skills and equipment and we do resupply where we are able. If we know an event is coming or if we know a township or an area is cut off, we will supply up-front. Then we will try and get as much food supplies or fuel in through whatever mechanism we can—very difficult once the road is cut—to some of these communities. Then the emergency operations centre takes control of supplying those areas with the goods that they need.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Are you or are you not in control of, for example, fuel rationing and managing the crisis in the community?

**CARLENE YORK:** Not the SES.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Do you know who is in control? Or is that a gap?

**CARLENE YORK:** No. It's the emergency operations centre, which is run by a police commander who steps into that role to run the emergency operations centre. Why we have those—

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** So who was managing that—

**CARLENE YORK:** We have transport—we have liaison officers from all the government departments that are required and charitable organisations as well so that they can task and do plans and strategies to make sure that those towns get what they need.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** I'm so sorry. I'm just really trying to get to the bottom of who manages that situation. It's the police, is it?

**CARLENE YORK:** Yes.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** Ms Cusack, when you've got a lead combat agency like the SES, they are in overall control and authority of the total response effort for that disaster—SES in the case of floods. The emergency management arrangements that underpin and support them are led by local commanders of police at a local, regional and then State level. So you'll often hear us refer to the SEOC, LEOC or REOC. They are local emergency operations centres, regional—and so those police commanders, those police authorities have all the functional areas of government working under their control in support of the combat agency. If there is a fuel disruption or a transport disruption, they'll have transport services or they'll have engineering services. There is a whole range of different elements that are managed by that senior commander in support of the lead agency.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** May I ask about communications? We had evidence yesterday in relation to the communications failure—that the communications management at the local emergency was actually being undertaken from four locations, including Coffs Harbour, so none of them were in the Northern Rivers. And in regards to that aspect of the plan, there was no communication by the New South Wales Government back to Essential Energy in relation to power failures that were bringing down communications across the region. I really want to understand the lines of responsibility and the plan for communications, which aggravated everything, including the rescue, so much.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** As I understand it, local emergency operations centres were established in parts of the Northern Rivers. The regional emergency operations centre, if I recall correctly, was established at Coffs Harbour—what we call the REOC there. The State emergency operations centre, the SEOC, was established down here in Sydney.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Why was it Coffs Harbour?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** Because that's the regional precinct under their police district. They'll look after an area broader than just the Northern Rivers or the north-east. That regional lens may extend to—don't quote me on the boundaries, but there'll be a broader boundary than just the Northern Rivers. The local emergency operations centres will be very much centres around the Northern Rivers and, indeed, it can be local councils as well, depending on how granular you want to get. Irrespective of the local, regional or State, there are the functional areas of emergency management support arrangements, which include engineering, telecommunications, or energy and utility services. Delegates joining up and connecting with government, corporate and private entities that service and support that industry or those various industries are tied together and brokered with information exchange, problem identification, tasking and strategies to resolve disruptions or longer term repairs.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Our evidence yesterday was that the government telco people were very focused on the government communications system and very proud of how successful that was, but nobody seemed to be focused on the fact that the victims and the community didn't have any access to that, so there were no communications for them. A bit like a restaurant where all the staff talk to each other but no-one takes the orders from the customers—

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** That doesn't make sense to me, Ma'am. What I mean by that is the telecommunications functional area is led by the Telco Authority of New South Wales. They have—

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Are they under your authority?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** No, they're an independent body. I happen to be, in a different role, the chair of the NSW Telco Authority, so I know a little bit about their function. But what I would say is, yes, they will have a focus, understandably and necessarily, on what we call the public safety network, which is actually the network that all the government response and emergency service agencies rely on to communicate and operate during disaster. But they also are the State's authority, through the telecommunications functional area, for coordinating and brokering all the interaction, the reports, the dissemination, the strategies with the telecommunications providers.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** I think this is where the failure was. And we were told by Telstra that there's a protocol that's unique to New South Wales that requires them to only take their orders from these people, and no orders were being given during the crisis.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** I'm happy to take that on notice—

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** I would appreciate that.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** But that doesn't add up in terms of operation—

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Can I also perhaps ask you on notice, who are the people with the phones who have access to the government network?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** I beg your pardon?

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Who are the people with the access to the government network? Maybe take that on notice.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** Sorry. I don't know what that—

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** In terms of the government communications that were very effective—

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** The radio network?

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** The radio network, yes. I'm in the evac centres and none of the staff in the evac centres had access to that. Nobody had any communications in the evac centres. So it's not all the staff who get it.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** No, and nor does every staff in an emergency service agency have a radio to talk on the government radio network or the public safety network. It is a controlled and managed communications platform for voice and data services across radios, not across phones, even though smarts are allowing that sort of bridging to occur. It runs parallel to what would be your conventional landline and mobile or cellular telephone networks.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** I understand.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** But they often share similar or related infrastructure or sites of infrastructure to get those messages. I think we know, through the—particularly in the Woodburn area, from memory, there was an NBN pit that was heavily impacted, and Woodburn, as we know, is one of the last places to drain away. The loss of services there, I think, disrupted about 50,000 customers for quite a period of time. And then the net result of losing those services meant that a lot of people were trying to use the cellular network, or the mobile network. That became significantly compromised in terms of trying to do voice traffic. Text messaging is the limited response, but holding conversations or sending photos or videos was really challenging.

The infrastructure design and challenges are that there's a lot of legacy involved in terms of where that infrastructure is and how it's configured. We are working as a government with those carriers. The authorities may have mentioned to the Committee what we call the Digital Twin strategy for the State, which is actually about a 3D model of how all the infrastructure is configured and managed, including telecommunications and some of the providers aren't very obliging with data.

**The CHAIR:** I am mindful we only have six or seven minutes left.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** I only have one question. Ms York, you've been involved in floods for a very long time. Given the Government's establishment of Resilience NSW, did they help or hinder in the most recent flooding?

**CARLENE YORK:** They have helped in the most recent flooding. Particularly in relation to—and I know we have been very much focused on Lismore—doing the preparation and prevention strategies, particularly around the Hawkesbury-Nepean Valley. We have taken a lot of those tools and information and pushed out across the northern part of New South Wales. We work very closely with Resilience NSW, and the handover to recovery—

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Do you believe it has added value to the work that you do in flood response?

**CARLENE YORK:** In flood response? They're not really involved. Their ambit is not in response; it is in preparation and prevention, and also in recovery. We are the lead agency for response.

**The Hon. MARK BANASIAK:** Ms York, picking up on Ms Cusack's question regarding the community of Yamba being cut off, the flood plan states that NSW SES may request resupply assistance from supporting agencies. In the case that Ms Cusack is talking about, did you request resupply from agencies? When did you request it?

**CARLENE YORK:** I'll have to take that on notice, I'm sorry, with Yamba.

**The Hon. MARK BANASIAK:** Just to close the loop on the swiftwater rescue, can all the agencies table their risk assessments that they do before they send the boats out? I note in the plan that SES does a risk assessment, and it would be handy for the Committee to have that.

**CARLENE YORK:** Could I just add to that? In relation to the risk assessments and training which have been spoken about, where they are approved flood rescue operators, it is a nationally accredited training program. Whether you're in one agency or another, the course is the same to be accredited for that.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** We heard from Telstra yesterday that during the Black Summer bushfires numerous organisations requested satellite phones. During these floods, Telstra received not one single request for satellite phones. Telstra had up to maybe 30, if not more, satellite phones that could have been deployed during these floods. Why weren't satellite phones requested, and who should have requested them?

**CARLENE YORK:** I know the SES has their own satellite phones, so we would not be requesting them. We didn't request any additional phones.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** You don't think any more additional phones were needed for the communities that had no communication whatsoever—perhaps to air-drop satellite phones to communities that didn't have any communication? That didn't come to mind?

**CARLENE YORK:** I wasn't involved in that decision-making process, no.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** Do you think there were enough satellite phones for those communities who were without communication for seven to 10 days?

**CARLENE YORK:** I accept the strategy, and I think we should look at it better into the future to see if we can get satellite phones into those areas. Another thing that we were battling with is—

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** But it was done for the fires, hence the question.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** That's right, so are you aware that the SES requested the satellite phones for the Black Summer bushfires?

**CARLENE YORK:** It wouldn't have been the SES; the RFS were in charge of the bushfires.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** There clearly weren't enough satellite phones, given the communication difficulties. Were you aware that Telstra had satellite phones for use in emergencies?

**CARLENE YORK:** I wasn't specifically aware, but then I don't make that request. The operations didn't, Daniel?

**DANIEL AUSTIN:** And I don't know that I was at the time, either. I do know that we deployed a number of pieces of our own communications infrastructure, particularly things we call cells on wheels, which help boost the mobile networks and the other radio and telephony networks. We deployed those into a whole variety of locations right up and down the coast to try to boost, but I don't believe at any point we did ask for additional satellite phones. As I said, we as an agency carry our own and have them positioned around the State.

**CARLENE YORK:** If I can also add, I've spoken to some of our volunteer units along the Hawkesbury, and they are trialling a project with radios or satellite phones to isolated communities along the Hawkesbury River too. It is a strategy that we could put in place into the future in the Northern Rivers.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** I want to know who issues the evacuation orders, if they're local or State issued. At one point there was an evacuation order for the whole Northern Rivers area, which was really confusing to people because nobody could leave and it didn't really make any sense. Lennox got one. Are those decisions being made by local controllers, who then push a button and everybody gets given the evacuation order, or is it being managed centrally?

**CARLENE YORK:** I'll let the deputy answer in relation to operations, because there is a State responsibility as well.

**DANIEL AUSTIN:** The incident controller, based locally, is the one that makes the decision as to whether they believe there is one warranted based on the flood intelligence plan. It's my understanding that—

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** That's the local person?

**DANIEL AUSTIN:** It's done locally. There is an approvals process that goes back to headquarters to sign that off and that process has actually been streamlined over the last 18 months to make sure any time constraints are actually removed. It's my understanding that it was an evacuation warning that was put out across

the Northern Rivers, not an evacuation order, which was basically designed to give people as much of a heads-up as possible because the situation was changing so rapidly.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** I am going to be honest and say I didn't understand the difference. I thought an evacuation warning was similar to an order, but thank you, I understand.

**CARLENE YORK:** We need to do some more education then. Just to add to the deputy, to streamline it, evacuation orders have to come up to me for permission to do that. I have delegated that down because that was a delaying, unnecessary step when we hear from the locals about what they need and what they're seeing. We try to put out a warning, wherever possible, to let the community know. But sometimes, because of the rain and because of the speed, we go straight to an evacuation order and make sure that the community is aware of it through various communication methods.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Ms York. From memory, I think a number of organisations took questions on notice. You have 21 days to answer and the secretariat will be in contact.

**(The witnesses withdrew.)**

**(Short adjournment)**

**Mr SHANE FITZSIMMONS**, Commissioner, Resilience NSW

**Ms ELERI MORGAN-THOMAS**, Acting Deputy Secretary, Housing, Disability and District Services, Department of Communities and Justice, affirmed and examined

**Mr LANCE CARDEN**, Director, Customer Service and Business Improvement, Department of Communities and Justice, affirmed and examined

**Dr RICHARD BROOME**, Director Environmental Health, Health Protection NSW, NSW Health, affirmed and examined

**Dr MICHAEL BOWDEN**, Acting Chief Psychiatrist, NSW Health, affirmed and examined

**The CHAIR:** Under the provisions of this Committee it is permissible to make an opening statement. Does anyone wish to make an opening statement? We will start with Dr Bowden.

**MICHAEL BOWDEN:** I just wanted to briefly outline the role of specialist mental health services during disasters. We're very aware that in the immediate aftermath of a disaster there will be very, very high levels of distress amongst all community members. Most of those people will do extremely well with community supports, some will need to have some professional help and others will develop mental health problems as a result of the disaster, some of which can be quite delayed. In terms of the mental health services, the primary role is to provide the specialist mental health service throughout the period of the response and the recovery. People who have an existing mental illness or mental health problems are particularly vulnerable to stress and disasters, and so continuity of their mental health care is particularly important during that period. Ensuring that there is access to ongoing care for emerging mental disorders during that period is also very important. To maintain the workforce and also to identify those individuals who are at particular risk is one of the key roles of mental health services during a disaster.

The presence of having mental health workers as part of the response for the recovery and being physically present is really important due to the reassurance that that provides, not only to community members but also to the frontline workers who are responding. The role more specifically is to really provide advice and support, particularly to the frontline workers who are responding, to recognise what levels of distress are normal, and to assist the frontline workers to recognise the difference between normal and abnormal levels of distress for individuals but also to advise those frontline workers on how they can best respond. It is also to help those frontline workers recognise when specialist assistance is required for particular individuals, and then to identify and promote pathways to specialist care. Finally, to support frontline workers so that we can assist them with managing their own trauma and also hopefully prevent burnout.

**ELERI MORGAN-THOMAS:** I start by acknowledging that we are on Gadigal land. I pay my respects to Elders past, present and emerging, and acknowledge Aboriginal colleagues who are with us today. In emergencies, the Department of Communities and Justice has two key roles: to staff evacuation centres to register disaster-affected people and coordinate key welfare services within centres and to manage emergency accommodation. Staffing for evacuation centres is typically provided by our local frontline workforce who work in child protection and housing. In an emergency we may have just a few hours to set up an evacuation centre and initially rely on our local staff. I would like to point out that in northern New South Wales we have 90 child protection, housing and NGO support staff who work in our Lismore office. That entire office was lost to the flood. Seven of the staff there lost their homes; many others lost cars, caravans and possessions. Eighteen of our staff were isolated because of where they live.

Eventually, we were able to bring in 35 staff from other areas, and that was as soon as we could, noting the difficulties of getting into many of the locations and finding accommodation for those staff. We also stood up a team in our Housing Contact Centre in Sydney to source and book accommodation. It's a credit to our local staff who led the DCJ response to the floods because they staffed 54 evacuation centres in northern New South Wales while remaining embedded in their community. They continued to work remotely to undertake their critical business, which is looking after children in care or children who are at risk in the child protection system; working with tenants in the social housing properties we manage who were affected by the floods; and also responding to homelessness, which is part of our business as usual. Our contracting team worked with locally based NGOs.

This was an emergency unlike others in recent history. Three months along—as of this week—we have 1,321 people in emergency accommodation, which is about the same number as Monday 6 January 2020, at the height of the Black Summer bushfires. In that instance in the Black Summer bushfires, which were spread over a larger area, we knew that as soon people went home, the number of people in emergency accommodation decreased by about 62 per cent one week later and then continued to reduce rapidly. That hasn't happened in these floods. People have not been able to go back home because of the extent of the property damage and the

dislocation. We still have around 50 frontline staff in the Housing Contact Centre dedicated to supporting the 2022 flood response in northern New South Wales, and we continue to support and provide emergency accommodation for disaster-affected people. We are continuing to work with those in accommodation towards longer term housing solutions.

**The CHAIR:** When we were doing site visits on the North Coast we were told that when Resilience NSW staff became involved, at the very beginning, one of the first things they did was to seek out accommodation for themselves. Did you investigate or was that matter brought to your attention?

**ELERI MORGAN-THOMAS:** I'm not aware of that.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Fitzsimmons?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** Sorry, I didn't hear the question.

**The CHAIR:** One of the first tasks that Resilience NSW staff did when they arrived was to seek out accommodation for themselves. How did that interplay with the DCJ?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** Completely.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Ms Morgan-Thomas, I first want to say that we heard amazing stories of the work that your staff did at the evacuation centres. I acknowledge that up-front. I know that you've outlined how many were affected and those kinds of things. We heard that people really went above and beyond, so I want to acknowledge that up-front. We also heard evidence that it was unclear where the evacuation centres would be and how they were to be established. What is the role of DCJ in that preparedness? If there was a flood tomorrow, would there now be a list of where the evacuation centres would be, and was there one beforehand? Can you just tell us about that?

**ELERI MORGAN-THOMAS:** Can I pass that question to Mr Fitzsimmons?

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Okay, so that is your job. Is that right?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** Well, as we were talking about this morning, that's one of the primary roles of the Local Emergency Management Committee and the Local Emergency Management Plan, where they identify and designate local evacuation centres.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Why was it the case, then, that the community did not know where the evacuation centres were, the SES was sending people to evacuation centres that didn't exist, and DCJ were desperately trying to get to places and they were not necessarily told where they were?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** I think, as it was explained this morning, some of the speed and ferocity with which things moved and they activated those nominated evacuation centres—so if you look in the EMPLAN for the Northern Rivers, you will find several pages of facilities and locations that could be used as evacuation centres and they'll have things like contact names and triggers and activations, and then the local WelFAC—

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Why didn't that work on this occasion?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** I'm just trying to answer it—and then the local activation for the resourcing and management of those is activated through the WelFAC, which is DCJ, and the resourcing. I did actually get sent a note out of session—I think it was you, Ms Faehrmann, that asked the question about Mullumbimby? Or was it you, Ms Sharpe?

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** No, Mullumbimby was Ms Faehrmann.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** Yes, it was me.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** They signalled that the one at Mullumbimby, the ex-services club, "DCJ staff attempted to access, but were all cut off due to the floodwater on the night of the twenty-seventh. The DCJ District WelFAC and team remotely managed the evacuation centre in constant engagement with Andrew Spice, the club manager"—I don't know if I'm supposed to say a name in this Committee, I'm sorry, so, the local club manager—"and as soon as the floodwaters receded that allowed the local DCJ staff to access, they were in there on the first of the third". So that was the particular note I got concerning that centre.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Thank you. We were also made aware that the club had not been reimbursed for its costs, as of yet. Do you know whether that has occurred?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** I don't know, but I'm happy to take that on notice.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Thank you. Mr Fitzsimmons, it sounds to me like you've got a lot of things that are written down. The evidence, though, that we have heard is that these things did not work in the

circumstances that were occurring. So just to go back to the evacuation centres, we heard evidence from the principal of Xavier College, an extraordinary story—if you have not read the transcript, I really encourage you to do so—of a school that just did it with their staff. They were told—I'm not sure by who—that they were not accredited and to go home. Literally, as the principal was driving home from the school that he was attempting to set up as an evacuation centre, he was told that "We're just going to accredit you now. Can you go back and please do it?" They ended up with over 800 people there. They actually hosted the entire evacuation of Ballina hospital and yet there was zero pre-planning that this school would be used in this way, and it only worked because of the extraordinary efforts of the staff and volunteers and some DCJ staff that worked there. How is it possible that such a critical evacuation centre didn't even seem to be on the list?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** I can't comment, one way or the other.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Who can?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** I am happy to take it on notice as to whether the facility was on the list as a preidentified site. I just don't have that plan at hand. But I think it's fair to say also, as has been signalled many times, we cannot overlook the scale and magnitude and speed with which circumstances and tragedy unravelled, and whilst the number of the—

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Yes, no-one says—

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** I'm just trying to answer the question, if I may.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** No, because you have said the same thing three times. We know that it was unprecedented. There had been previous flooding in Lismore in 2021. We have been through the bushfires, and there was 2017 flooding. There have been reviews after reviews that would have pointed to exactly the same issues in relation to preparedness. My concern is not that it was higher than we had ever seen; we know that, and there was more impact. But there just seem to have been no preparedness. There seems to be a lot of bits of paper that have what people's roles are, but it seemed to make zero difference.

A school principal established an evacuation centre that was so well run that it ended up being the evacuation centre for the hospital, but he received zero support in doing that because it was never considered that his school would be able to do this. Where has it fallen down here? Who was responsible for telling this principal that his site that he was setting up wasn't needed and to go home, and then someone else gets a phone call and says, "Please, we really need you to do it. Can you go in there"? Who is making those calls? Is that your organisation?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** No.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Is it DCJ?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** Not at all.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Is it the SES? Who is it?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** As was explained this morning, the identification and the activation of recovery centres is the lead agency. In the case of the floods, it was the SES and the local or regional emergency operational controller, depending on—

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Sorry, this is the evacuation centre, not—

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Evacuation centres.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** Sorry, did I say recovery?

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Yes.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** My apologies.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** We will get onto recovery centres.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** I'm talking about evacuation centres. They are identified and activated through those local emergency management committees, particularly between—

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Who is on them?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** You're talking police—

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** The agencies around the table there, when they're working at that local level, who identifies the evacuation centres?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** As I have said already, they will be pre-identified in local plans as designated evacuation centres that could be activated in the event of a disaster—a flood or something. But we also have to be mindful that during this event and other events, sometimes circumstances dictate that a venue or a facility may be activated through the initiative of a local community member that grows to become—

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Well, we're very lucky that we do.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** Absolutely, and that happens depending on different circumstances. In the document that is developed by the local teams, they don't designate every building across the local government area or collection of local government areas. They designate those that they believe are the most logical and viable to be identified as evacuation centres, but—

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** When you know there is a massive flood coming, as you knew at the end of February, the SES is doing their thing, which is sorting it all out. Surely, at some level there is planning, "Okay, we're going to need evacuation centres." Who gives the order that says, "Okay, we're going to need an evacuation centre in Ballina. We're going to need to use the university in Lismore. We have these ones on the list but it looks like it's a bit high, so we're going to move those"? Where is that decision made? How is that communicated and to whom?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** The local incident controller and the local emergency management team—

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Who are?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** —which, in this case, will be the lead local officer for the SES and the local superintendent or inspector of police, operating in their LEOCON or REOCON role. That is managed through that local committee and advised through to the State level for situational awareness so we know how many evacuation centres—

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** So then it comes to you at that point?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** It comes through to the WelFAC functional coordination and the SEOC at the State level so we know—remembering during this period there were 80 evacuation centres that were established for these flood events, 54 of which were in the Northern Rivers.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Yes, and no-one is saying that they weren't needed. We're simply saying—

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** All those triggers were activated locally.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Who approves or accredits the operation of an evac centre? Who's in charge of that?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** As I signalled this morning, when the local committee, the lead agency and the police identify and designate an evacuation centre, it's then activated through the local WelFAC, which is the DCJ officers and personnel, and they—

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** So, Ms Morgan-Thomas—

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** I'm just trying to answer—

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** No, that's fine.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** But there is—

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** You're not answering the question that I'm asking.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** I am.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Who rang the principal to tell him that that he was not accredited and to go home? Who then rang him and said, "By the way"—

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** I don't know.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** This is what we need to know.

**The Hon. MARK BANASIAK:** Someone knows.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Someone knows. Who then rang this principal and said—

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** He had evacuators and had to send them home.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** He had evacuators at the school. He had to send them home. He's then driving home and someone rings him—as you can imagine, he probably didn't take it down—and says, "We're just doing the paperwork for you now. Can you go back and re-set up?" Who was talking to the principal?

**ELERI MORGAN-THOMAS:** My understanding is that it was our staff who accredited the thing, and it was done in an ongoing discussion with the principal and the deputy principal in light of an emerging situation.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** What role is the central command providing in that to you?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** State level?

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Both.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** Are you talking about State level?

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** I'm talking about both.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** When you say "command", you're talking about the local control centre, EOC, that runs things in that local area. They're determining evac centres, resourcing and arrangements.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** I'm just trying to work out how a school principal ended up with 800 people, with his staff looking after people with significant disabilities, with people who had been at Ballina hospital, and were doing that successfully. Essentially their job was made harder not easier. I'm just trying to get to the bottom of how that happened.

**ELERI MORGAN-THOMAS:** From DCJ's point of view, we're incredibly grateful to the principal and his staff for working very constructively with us to solve an emerging problem that happened very quickly, when Ballina Island had to be evacuated.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** They were amazing.

**ELERI MORGAN-THOMAS:** There were a number of aged-care facilities and the hospital had to be evacuated at very short notice. There were a lot of things happening at that time. My understanding is it was not ideally coordinated but was actually a very effective thing that really helped the community.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** No, it was amazing. After all of this, how do we make it easier? We seem to make it extraordinarily hard and extra stressful for people under very tough situations.

**The Hon. ROD ROBERTS:** Ms Morgan-Thomas, it's a follow-on from Ms Sharpe's question. You said it was your agency that, in the end, approved or accredited the Xavier college at Ballina to be the evacuation centre. Was it also your agency that rang them and told them, "Pack this up. Shut it down. Send everybody back home," to their homes in the flooded streets of Ballina?

**ELERI MORGAN-THOMAS:** I'm not aware of that. I'm not aware that it was—

**The Hon. ROD ROBERTS:** How did your agency get involved in the re-accreditation if you didn't know that it was shut down in the first place?

**ELERI MORGAN-THOMAS:** My understanding is that we were trying to solve an emerging problem that was happening then and a pragmatic decision was made by people on the ground.

**The Hon. ROD ROBERTS:** Can you take it on notice?

**ELERI MORGAN-THOMAS:** I can take it on notice.

**The Hon. ROD ROBERTS:** We really want to know who rang this bloke, this poor principal, who stepped up, along with his staff, and said, "We need to do something here. There's a gap that needs to be filled," and they did it. Somebody rang them and said, "Listen. Shut this down. Turn out all the people that you've already got in there. Turn them out onto the street." "Where am I going to send them to?" "I don't know, not our problem. Turn them out." If that's your department, we need to know.

**ELERI MORGAN-THOMAS:** I'll take that on notice. I'm not aware that we did, but I will take that on notice.

**The Hon. ROD ROBERTS:** Somebody did.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** When you say "our people", do you mean department of housing people or Department of Communities and Justice people?

**ELERI MORGAN-THOMAS:** Department of Communities and Justice incorporates social housing, child protection—

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Correct.

**ELERI MORGAN-THOMAS:** —and also corrections and all of those justice—

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** I understand that. That's why I'm asking which of the agencies.

**ELERI MORGAN-THOMAS:** Communities and Justice is one agency. But the staff that we rely on are our staff that work in child protection, housing and some of our staff who work in contracting.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** From a portfolio point of view, housing is separate from community services. Yes?

**ELERI MORGAN-THOMAS:** No.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** In terms of the Ministers and the reporting, it's separate?

**ELERI MORGAN-THOMAS:** No, they both report to Minister Maclaren-Jones.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** When everybody arrives at the evacuation centre, certainly in Ballina, there's a whole lot of emergency accommodation claimants, so people can be booked into hotels and things like that. When that runs out, the community services staff were saying that they're waiting for Housing in Sydney to approve more emergency places in Ballina. People are sitting in the centre, waiting for hours, not knowing if the staff are going to be allowed to book more accommodation or if everybody is going to sleep on the floor that night. I'm pretty clear that those staff were talking to a different agency.

**ELERI MORGAN-THOMAS:** They were talking to the Housing contact centre. They are based in Sydney. They're on the phones. They're a contact centre, so they deal with a lot of housing issues. They're specifically for that. They also do the booking of emergency accommodation. One of the constraints that they were facing was actually finding enough accommodation to put people in.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** No, no. They found all the accommodation. There were no more places available, and there were still people—this was Cabbage Tree. They had to wait for hours, so in the end they organised dinner for people, but they had no idea. It just seemed like absolute red tape to me.

**ELERI MORGAN-THOMAS:** We had to find places to put people and match people—

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** No, that wasn't causing the delay. They said, "We've filled all the approved places now. There is more accommodation in Ballina but it's just not on our list. We need Sydney to approve that and we sit there for two hours waiting." Is it the housing people who accredit in Sydney or is it the locals who accredit on the ground?

**ELERI MORGAN-THOMAS:** Do you mean the emergency accommodation?

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** The evacuation centres.

**ELERI MORGAN-THOMAS:** It's our staff on the ground.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Can you provide to the Committee details of what accreditation means? There must be protocol or paperwork or something.

**ELERI MORGAN-THOMAS:** I can take that on notice.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** In terms of the centres, why was Lake Ainsworth at Lennox Head, which is a 200-bed government-owned facility operated by sport and recreation, never utilised for evacuees? They were going into places like schools and sleeping on the floor when we had government-owned accommodation with beds and kitchens sitting there not being used.

**ELERI MORGAN-THOMAS:** Do you mean why didn't we use it as an evacuation centre? We've certainly used it for emergency accommodation.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Yes, but for staff, not for victims.

**ELERI MORGAN-THOMAS:** I don't know why it wasn't an evacuation centre. I can take that on notice.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** It has been used and I think it continues to be used for emergency accommodation.

**ELERI MORGAN-THOMAS:** No, there was a flooding issue.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** Yes, it got flooded. The access in and out kept getting flooded.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** No, it didn't. I'm sorry. I've heard this, but it didn't.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** There was some disruption with it.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Resilience staff who came to the Northern Rivers moved in there, so it was being used for the emergency. I suppose with 180 people from Cabbage Tree Island—

**ELERI MORGAN-THOMAS:** We were using it for emergency accommodation.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** And people with pets as well.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Subsequently.

**ELERI MORGAN-THOMAS:** Subsequently, yes.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** Yes.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** High needs. But there is no information about how many. When you've got 180 people in one community, why you would have a 200-bed government-operated facility not being used has never been explained to me. Why people were sleeping on the floor in the Lennox Head Cultural Centre a kilometre down the road when there were empty government-owned beds has never been explained to me. I do not understand that deployment.

**The Hon. MARK BANASIAK:** Just listening to the answers you've given to the Hon. Rod Roberts and the Hon. Penny Sharpe, it is making my head spin in terms of who is in charge of what and all the acronyms flying around. In the testimony in the previous session the SES was saying that Resilience NSW runs the evacuation centres and then you've said, "No, DCJ run the evacuation centres." Now we have these local coordinators deciding where evacuation centres are. It's like watching that skit *Who's on First?* with Abbott and Costello. At what point do we come to the realisation that we've overcomplicated this and actually simplify the process? I guess that question is to you, Mr Fitzsimmons.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** I will try and avoid acronyms, but I don't know how I can explain it any more simply. I believe it is designed to be as simple and as locally applicable as it can be. The State's emergency management arrangements typically fall on three layers: local, regional and State. Local is where the decisions, actions and resourcing typically occurs, and support and assistance comes from further afield when the locals need and require it. When it comes to evacuation centres, the point of clarification is, given what you've just said there—I'll just reiterate from this morning that the comment from the SES was around the question of who authorises and leads the initiation of evacuation centres and that is the combat agency with the police. The resourcing of those centres is with DCJ through the local Welfare Services Functional Area arrangements which, in an acronym, is referred to as WelFAC.

That is all identified and articulated through the local plan. There is a WelFAC plan that supports the arrangements for local and State support, where needed, to those local arrangements. As I tried to explain this morning, the vast majority of evacuation centres operate effectively through those local arrangements. Attendance at evacuation centres is often not very high in disasters and they will last for a couple of days. I know you don't like hearing it, but the scale, complexity and unprecedented nature of this disaster meant that a significant number of evacuation centres saw remarkably high patronage with people attending. A number of those centres were formally escalated to major evac centres, which brought in a higher level of command and control led by police, particularly the Lismore centre.

**The Hon. MARK BANASIAK:** Can we just go to resourcing. We heard testimony yesterday, and we heard it when we were up north in Windsor, that people were traumatised by having to tell their story three or four different times. Resilience NSW is apparently in charge of preparing for floods and doing things better. Why haven't we developed a computer system that all the agencies can plug into so that a person can tell them once and then all the agencies can share that data so there is not this traumatic retelling? I appreciate you might say it is unprecedented, but this is not our first flood and we have had computers since God knows when.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** Correct.

**The Hon. MARK BANASIAK:** Why hasn't this computer system been developed? It is a simple database we are talking about. It is not rocket science.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** With respect, from what I understand it is not that simple.

**The Hon. MARK BANASIAK:** It is a database.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** But we have gone in partnership with Service NSW and there is a product under development right now. A couple of phases are being worked through. You may recall through the House

at the end of last year that, historically, some of the big challenges have been the inhibitors to sharing data between agencies in disasters. The Government resolved for the ability to share data during declared emergencies in the interests of people who need support and assistance. Those material elements have been affected in the last 12 months. Of course, even notwithstanding the product being finalised, what we have been able to do increasingly through this event is have more and more customer care services being centralised and coordinated to try to limit people having to retell their stories, because we know it is one of the most compounding and troubling aspects of a disaster.

**The CHAIR:** Commissioner, the evidence presented to us was that people had to retell their stories because Resilience NSW people were clocking off and someone else in Resilience NSW was replacing them in there. It is not sharing information with other agencies; it is sharing information in your own organisation.

**The Hon. MARK BANASIAK:** We also heard evidence that recovery centre managers were writing down information on a piece of paper, scanning it and sending it off somewhere into the ether. That is not workable.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** With respect, it is not into the ether. If you are referring to things like Disaster Relief Grant applications, historically that has been a very manual process. This time around we have increased the digitisation and the integration of that program. Yes, they were being scanned and sent down to a central point so they could be put into a more simple spreadsheet of data collation. That move has also then further progressed to be with Service NSW, and Revenue NSW more particularly, with the screening and fast-tracking of those grant applications to ensure that the applicant is integrated into the broader mix of support and assistance available to try to limit the challenge of people having to retell their story, no matter who it is.

**The Hon. MARK BANASIAK:** Will this database management software that you are talking about be ready for the next natural disaster we have?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** I will take that on notice and give you an update on when the timing of it is, but certainly an iteration will be up and running, I suspect, ahead of the next disaster season.

**The CHAIR:** One quick question to the Chief Psychiatrist. What is the impact on people who have just experienced major trauma being asked to repeatedly retell their stories? That was the evidence that we were given. They were very critical. They would meet a Resilience NSW person, tell them their story, that person would clock off. Then they would have to retell their story, that person would clock off and they would have to retell their story again—in fact, five or six times was the evidence we were given. What is the impact on someone who has experienced major trauma?

**MICHAEL BOWDEN:** It is certainly very important that people are listened to and don't have to repeat their story over and over. There are concerns about retelling stories being a traumatic experience for people, although different people do experience that in different ways. But certainly that is something that we try to avoid if possible.

**The CHAIR:** You're the State's Chief Psychiatrist. What is your opinion on that occurring to someone who has just experienced one of the worst floods in New South Wales history?

**MICHAEL BOWDEN:** Yes, certainly, it's something that you want to avoid—people having to tell their story over and over—because it can be retraumatising.

**Ms SUE HIGGINSON:** Dr Bowden, we heard some really incredible evidence from some experts from the University Centre for Rural Health, based in Lismore. They provided evidence that they are really concerned that we don't have perhaps—I don't want to phrase their evidence incorrectly. But they have a concern that we don't have the mental health capacity now in the Northern Rivers to deal with what we are facing. People in Lismore are incredibly traumatised, whether they've had a direct or indirect impact. In your role as the Chief Psychiatrist, are you taking measures to build the network or the profession? The evidence was that the profession was already significantly suffering, the profession was moving southwards, and there is a housing crisis in the north. What steps are you taking now?

**MICHAEL BOWDEN:** There are certainly a lot of different complexities around the staffing issue. In terms of resourcing for medical and health staff in general, the resourcing, I'm told, in the northern New South Wales area is adequate. But for a long time they have really struggled to attract and retain workforce. Some of those elements that you mentioned there—around cost of housing, for example—but also people wanting to live within major metropolitan areas have been an impediment to attracting and retaining staff. You are quite right that there are shortages of specialist mental health clinicians, including medical, nursing and allied health. That is something that we've been attempting to address over a long period of time. There are a number of measures in place currently to try to support the mental health needs of the local community in northern New South Wales,

particularly through the recovery phase of the disaster. Some of those are temporary measures—but when I say "temporary" I'm talking about up to four years from now—as a way of dealing with the immediate aftermath and the recovery from the disaster.

Certainly at the time of the flood itself there were many mental health clinicians who were directly impacted by the flood. We heard of 33 mental health clinicians who'd lost their homes at that time. There was also the isolation of the town, with roads and major motorways being cut off and people unable to get in or out of the area. So those staff who were on the ground worked extra to be able to support the services. Then, of course, the people who were there later—who were then able to come in—were able to do so. There was also a response from other health districts around New South Wales to provide workers to provide support to the health system in the Northern Rivers area. The way that that was managed was that the specific skill sets that were required were identified locally by the mental health executive team and then there were people who were deployed from around the State to support that.

**Ms SUE HIGGINSON:** I have a quick follow-up question. Is part of going forward an acknowledgement that this presents potentially novel issues around climate change and the psychological impacts that that has on a person who has experienced a disaster of this scale?

**MICHAEL BOWDEN:** It's a very difficult thing to draw out. Certainly there is a very heightened awareness of the issues of climate change. I think that people are concerned, particularly having repeated natural disasters around Australia and around the State, and the cumulative impacts of the different disasters and including the pandemic, so it's not all around climate. But, certainly, there is a heightened awareness, which means that people are worried about the potential for future impacts. Certainly, in Lismore itself, there was the repeat flood only several weeks after the first one. So, there is a residual trauma and anxiety around repeats of that kind of disaster happening again.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Dr Bowden, I have a couple of questions touching on what we were talking about before, about telling the story. I'm trying to look forward on this. When someone comes in, do we try and extract as much information as we can from them at that point that they will need further on, or do we capture bits and pieces as they drip-feed it in and then we need a central database to capture that in? I'm just trying to get a best way to get as much information out of these people while having the lowest impact on them.

**MICHAEL BOWDEN:** Yes. There are different types of information, clearly. There is the practical stuff around loss of housing, loss of possessions, and so on and the immediate kind of needs for the person. So when we think about the immediate needs for safety and for shelter and for food, that trumps everything, at least in that initial period. In terms of inquiring about people's traumatic experiences, we have frontline staff who are trained in what is known as psychological first aid. That's a particular approach which takes account of the need not to probe into psychological distress and people's coping mechanisms too deeply in a way that can retraumatise them, and being very mindful of where the person is up to in terms of what kind of information they want to talk about and what kind of information is needed. Certainly, to have a measured approach around all of that and also to give people information about where they can seek assistance for distress, what are normal responses to distress and what people can expect over a period of time, and information about when and where to seek help is really important so that people can be informed about when should they seek help, how can they seek help, and what is a part of a normal reaction.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** I'm guessing when they're telling that story it's a different way of extracting information of "Where does your grandmother live and where is she now?" versus "What's your annual income?"

**MICHAEL BOWDEN:** Yeah.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Is it the same person getting that information at the same time, or do we have different people doing that, ideally?

**MICHAEL BOWDEN:** I don't know the answer to that. That's outside of—

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Ideally, like from a psychological perspective. I'm looking forward, trying to think how we can improve this.

**MICHAEL BOWDEN:** It's a difficult question because, you know, what's ideal in terms of a particular person's experience is going to be very varied.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Okay.

**MICHAEL BOWDEN:** And, you know, some people will actually want to talk at the time and give all the information to one person; other people actually want to know that the person that they're giving this specific information to is the person who's going to be able to help them the most with that particular aspect.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** So we need to capture that and capture it once. Again moving forward, some of the psychological and emotional presentations are still some time off. We're going to have people come forward who at this stage aren't even aware that they're going to need that sort of assistance. What can we do for the communities to, I guess, strengthen the overall mental fitness of our community? I am not thinking specifically of clinical services but building that community. I am wondering what role the CWA, the crochet club and the P&C and sporting clubs might play in that.

**MICHAEL BOWDEN:** They're all incredibly important. One of the things that we know about resilience to trauma is that when the community pulls together and works together as part of the recovery, that's enormously protective of people's mental health. So that's a really important element. Also, because people have different support needs and so on, some people will want to speak with, say, a trained counsellor or a mental health worker whereas others will actually want to join the local recovery committee or the recovery effort as part of the community, and some of those community groups that you mentioned, like CWA or whatever, are really important.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Just one final question, if I can. I'm still confused about the Lake Ainsworth thing—what happened and when. Would it be possible to take on notice a bit of a time line of who went when and where, and why they were moved out? Is that something we can take on notice?

**The CHAIR:** And also there was the very first question put. The allegation was that Resilience NSW staff took those positions in preference to the community.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** I can categorically say that we didn't take any positions in lieu of the community. As a matter of fact, one of the biggest challenges, apart from access, is making sure that any accommodation from any personnel from across government or supporting agencies coming into the area did not compromise personnel.

**The CHAIR:** The allegation put to us was that Resilience NSW accommodated themselves first.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** That's not true.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** I'm not stepping back from that.

**The CHAIR:** No. That's what we heard, Catherine.

**The Hon. ROD ROBERTS:** I have two questions—one quick one to you, Mr Fitzsimmons. You mentioned a minute ago that there was a database under construction at the moment. When did that commence?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** That was a body of work—the "tell your story once" project—that was government funded. I've just got an update now that we are expecting the beta version of that minimum viable product to be ready for September of this year. It has been a capture of the needs and requirements. It is about connecting with people, getting their details, getting their registration so that when they are interacting with other personnel—

**The Hon. ROD ROBERTS:** Sorry to interrupt you, Mr Fitzsimmons. We're on the clock here. That wasn't my question. The question was when did the work commence on this database?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** It would have been approved and commenced within the last 12 months, but I'll get an accurate time for you. It's a project in partnership with Service NSW.

**The Hon. ROD ROBERTS:** If you can on notice, that would be good. Ms Morgan-Thomas, I have a question for you. As you would appreciate, shelter and accommodation is one of the biggest issues for people who are displaced from their homes. We heard that in the early days of the recovery centres, department of housing staff were present as an agency assisting in that role. But in, I think, early May, those staff were withdrawn from the recovery centres and those staff that were left at the recovery centres were given a 1800 number to call for assistance in helping flood victims with accommodation issues. That 1800 number was the same number given to all the public. So that recovery centre worker is sitting on a 1800 number for ages and ages to try and get assistance. Is that correct, that they were withdrawn? And, if so, why were they withdrawn bearing in mind that shelter is such a primary need?

**ELERI MORGAN-THOMAS:** Because we were supporting people through a range of means, not just the recovery centres. Our analysis showed that we were getting fewer and fewer inquiries through that mechanism

and more through other ways, and there were ways that we could support people better. So it was because we were getting fewer and fewer inquiries.

**LANCE CARDEN:** I might just add that we also set up the Housing Flood Recovery Service, which was using housing specialist staff that we had in the recovery centres. When the inquiry numbers reduced, we moved those staff to be more focused on the recovery effort and the support for people that were in the motorhomes, the camps and the commercial accommodation, to have that specialist staff supporting them on the ground.

**The Hon. ROD ROBERTS:** Do you think, in hindsight, that providing a 1800 number to the staff in the recovery centre who had a traumatised victim sitting opposite them, and who would say, "Hang on, I'll ring the 1800 number", and the victim sitting there for half an hour to an hour waiting to get assistance was a smart move? Could it have been done better?

**ELERI MORGAN-THOMAS:** I can find out what the waiting time is. My understanding is it's nowhere near that long, because we had a dedicated team in Sydney—so not putting pressure on local resources—and we resourced that very well to manage calls quickly and efficiently. Because you're right, nobody wants to be sitting on the other end of a phone. But I can find out on notice what the average waiting time was, because I don't think it was that much.

**The CHAIR:** To follow that up, we were then told that they set up for staff that were waiting on the 1800 number. They had set up a 1300 telephone number for them to wait on. That's what the evidence yesterday was.

**LANCE CARDEN:** I'd have to take that on notice as well.

**The Hon. MARK BANASIAK:** As an initial follow-up on that, you said that you withdrew the resources because there were inquiries coming through other mechanisms. What were those other mechanisms that you were getting greater traffic through? I think that's important for the Committee to know.

**ELERI MORGAN-THOMAS:** Partly through work on the ground, talking to people. That's not the only mechanism. There's a recovery centre. But also, because it was advertised on Service NSW, people could call Service NSW or they could call our Housing Contact Centre through the dedicated number we set up. People were using—they weren't just having to drive to or go to a recovery centre to do it. There are other ways. But I can get those data for you.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** We heard evidence about the centre at Southern Cross University—that there were issues with staffing in the first few weeks there. Ms Morgan-Thomas, I might just ask you: What was the situation with DCJ staff at the SCU recovery centre?

**ELERI MORGAN-THOMAS:** I don't know the specific numbers of how many people we had. I can find that out for you. But if I hark back to my opening statement, we've got 90 staff in Lismore, which is where Southern Cross University is, many of whom had been affected by the floods themselves. We staffed 54 evacuation centres in northern New South Wales. In northern New South Wales altogether we've got 225 staff. In the first initial bits we weren't able to bring in people from anywhere else. We had to rely on what we had, even before—

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** Can I just jump in? I do have evidence here—in fact, the Committee received from the local member that in fact there were DCJ staff there. Then she got told that they were ordered out by Resilience NSW. Are you aware of that?

**ELERI MORGAN-THOMAS:** No, I'm not aware of that.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** Not at all.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Can you take it on notice?

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** Neither of you have heard the local member saying—and she said it publicly as well—that in fact DCJ staff got ordered out by Resilience NSW?

**ELERI MORGAN-THOMAS:** I have heard that but—

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** Did you make inquiries—

**ELERI MORGAN-THOMAS:** Yes, I did.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** —when you found that out? Sorry—when you heard that, did you make inquiries internally?

**ELERI MORGAN-THOMAS:** When I heard that—yes, I did.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** Okay, so what happened?

**ELERI MORGAN-THOMAS:** Nobody was aware of it.

**The CHAIR:** You just let the allegation stand? You didn't investigate it? You didn't follow it up?

**ELERI MORGAN-THOMAS:** I did follow up.

**The CHAIR:** Did you follow it up with Mr Fitzsimmons?

**ELERI MORGAN-THOMAS:** No, I didn't follow up with Mr Fitzsimmons.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** I followed it up internally when I heard about it and we can find no such evidence of any such thing ever occurring. If you've got the example or whatever, then I'm more than happy to have a look at it.

**The CHAIR:** It's in the transcript—provided to evidence to this inquiry.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** With respect, we heard that, but DCJ confirmed they had no evidence of any such direction being given by us and I've got no indication of anyone in my team suggesting anything. It doesn't even make sense.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** Can I just continue then? Again, this is from Ms Janelle Saffin, the local member. It doesn't sound like it was just a rumour because she in fact had to act to get staff put back in. She said:

... I put in a call at the highest level; they were put back in. Then they got pushed out again; I did that again. I heard it happened in other centres.

Are you saying that Ms Saffin is lying to the Committee about what was going on, Mr Fitzsimmons?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** I'm saying I have no indication from any of my team that any such thing occurred with us ordering DCJ out. The only thing that may have happened is, around that period at the end of March, which was for a couple of days—where there was the cessation of some of the centres because of the flood threat for the second wave, which was four weeks on. I don't know if that's the connection but there was no ordering to get anybody out in terms of the way that that was described in the media. I haven't read the transcript.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** Alright. Ms Morgan-Thomas, did you receive calls from the highest level—say, from the Premier or anyone else within Government? Did you receive calls to get more staff into those recovery centres?

**ELERI MORGAN-THOMAS:** I didn't but I wasn't in this position at that point in time. And I'm not aware that there was but I will make inquiries about that.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** That's a different question you just asked.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** It is. I'm asking you a different one.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** In relation to a question about looking for more people into evacuation centres, yes, those calls did come through and we actioned those. That's where, following my comments this morning, in the first few days in that first week we formally requested, particularly, the Southern Cross University be escalated as per the evacuation guidelines to a major evacuation centre, which brings with it—

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** How long did that take?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** I can confirm the time line but it was within that first week. I've got a note here somewhere but I'll double-check that for you. But that was actually the escalation for police control and authority and additional resources. That's where we particularly, on that request for more resources—we sent our own agency, along with a number of other agencies, to send people in, with the support and assistance around the management of that centre but not detracting in any way from the specialist teams of DCJ, which were also bolstered with out of area personnel.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** Because the local member, in the same body of evidence, also says that the Salvation Army, who I understand are given the task of providing the food—in her words, no-one would talk to them. Again, she had to make phone calls to make sure that the Salvos were hooked into the State process. There is communication breakdown after communication breakdown. Do you think that was good enough, Ms Morgan-Thomas, in terms of what you have heard happened? I understand you weren't in charge at the time. Is that right? We're asking you questions, you weren't—

**ELERI MORGAN-THOMAS:** That's correct, yes.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** Mr Carden, were you?

**LANCE CARDEN:** I wasn't involved in that part of the process, sorry.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** Right. Okay. So we've got two people presenting for DCJ that weren't involved, at the time, in terms of evacuation centre process?

**ELERI MORGAN-THOMAS:** Yes.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** I can answer some of those questions. On Wednesday 2 March discussions commenced with police regarding escalating the Southern Cross University to a major evacuation centre as per the guidelines. By Friday 4 March, when access and other things could be granted, some of our staff started attending the SCU and the GSAC—the Goonellabah sports centre, which was another evacuation centre. On Saturday 5 March that request to formally establish the major evacuation centre was further progressed with the police. On Tuesday 8 March the recovery centre opened at the Southern Cross University, which was simultaneously running with the evacuation centre as well.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** Saturday 5 March, when it was declared a major evacuation centre—is that the language you use?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** It was—yes, the formal request to establish that as a major evacuation centre. Yes.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** Was it made or granted then?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** I'll take that on notice.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** That does sound like it's about five nights too late.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** It was about four days or so thereafter, yes—that it was formally.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** I just need to go to another line of questioning. I'm assuming it will be taken up with others. Dr Broome, I need to ask about the issue of black mould. We have heard, time and time again, witness after witness after witness, the incredible trauma of having to deal with black mould and the concerns about people's health. People are saying there is mould absolutely everywhere and we're not dealing with it. Is that a concern? Are you concerned about the health of people in the Northern Rivers in terms of how much black mould is around?

**RICHARD BROOME:** What I can say is that mould is certainly a health concern. There is pretty good evidence that exposure to dampness and mould is a little bit—sometimes damp environments are a health concern in their own right. But dampness and mould is associated with conditions such as breathing problems, sore eyes, runny nose. If you've got asthma, it can exacerbate asthma. Very rarely, and predominantly in people who have pre-existing lung conditions or are immunocompromised, you can get mould infections—but those are very rare. Mould is absolutely a concern in the Northern Rivers, but I think probably it's just been such a wet season mould has been an issue all over the State. I think many people have experienced it. It is very hard to avoid dampness inside your house almost wherever you are along the eastern seaboard at the moment. Mould is certainly an issue. NSW Health's role in this, really, has always been advisory. We develop advice and information for the community. We do try to raise awareness of the fact that mould is a health issue and how you can prevent it.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** Just specifically, in the few weeks after the floods—now, even—what steps has NSW Health taken to get your health message out about black mould to the people who have got black mould from floor to ceiling, in every single roof, can't get rid of it and don't know how to get rid of it? In what ways are you communicating with them about what they can do?

**RICHARD BROOME:** Generally speaking, we have information that is longstanding information. We've updated it with the recent issues to make it more simple for people. That information has been provided to all agencies so it could be distributed to people from recovery centres, evacuation centres—those sorts of things. I think it was also circulated to MPs and other stakeholders, too, so we tried to—

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** Any doorknocking? Have you gone from door to door? Does NSW Health do anything like that?

**RICHARD BROOME:** No, we wouldn't normally do doorknocking for an issue.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** It's not a normal situation, with respect, Dr Broome.

**RICHARD BROOME:** Sorry, yes. No, our general approach is advice through recovery centres. We've also done media, so the local public health unit did a piece of media on the North Coast to explain about mould. There's been social media as well. We've worked with all the agencies to ensure that they're aware of the

information to provide to people about how to remediate mould, but mould is a complicated issue. Obviously, in preventing mould, you need to be able to dry your house out. If there are structural issues, that can be a challenge, obviously. But it can also be cleaned. Our advice for cleaning it is to do that with a solution of vinegar and water or, in more difficult circumstances, bleach.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** This is a public health crisis. Everybody is talking about how unprecedented the whole situation is. The public health situation is kind of unprecedented, as well, as is the mental health crisis. I'll ask Dr Bowden to answer this: What has been the door-to-door response from NSW Health, as the people in charge of environmental health and mental health in the State, to make sure that your people are reaching those who can't access social media? We have heard from people who are coming out of their houses after being in there for two months, so they haven't been to recovery centres. They don't have access to media. They're probably not watching the TV, for goodness sake, and maybe can't do anything else. What has been your door-to-door strategy, your on-the-ground strategy? It sounds like NSW Health doesn't have one in terms of black mould.

**RICHARD BROOME:** No, we don't have an on-the-ground strategy in regard to black mould. As I say, our primary communication channel here is to develop information that all agencies in the whole of government can use to communicate with the people who are interacting with those services.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** We're hearing that there was no information about black mould. Every time I asked any witness about what they were receiving in terms of education and information about black mould, they said it wasn't in existence. Dr Broome, that sounds like a failure. Giving it to agencies is fine, but I'm asking about the people on the ground and who ultimately takes responsibility for that.

**RICHARD BROOME:** As I say, we have provided and we've developed advice and information that tells people how they can manage mould. We circulate that through—we use a variety of channels to get it to people. That's our approach.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** Can I get Dr Bowden's response just on mental health?

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** I'm going to that too, but that's a separate question. Let him answer it.

**MICHAEL BOWDEN:** Yes, the mental health recovery clinicians do outreach, and particularly to hard-to-reach communities, as well as the local mental health teams actively following up with people with known or emerging mental health problems. And then, of course, there is the identification of people within the recovery centres and from those frontline clinicians.

**RICHARD BROOME:** May I just add something else? Obviously, we do have local public health unit staff up in those areas. They do engage with communities, and they will engage on a whole range of issues. Mould is one concern that you're raising, but there's a whole range of public health issues associated with flooding. So there is that local engagement, so I don't know specifically how much of that has been around mould. We do have those materials, and they are available to people.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Just to follow up on the mental health, we visited Wardell CORE, who are doing an incredible job with people. They're very lucky to have a volunteer who's been working pro bono for the last three months doing door-to-door outreach in Wardell in relation to mental health. They're very concerned about the state of where people are at and the fact that they know it's going to be there for a long time. Are you able to provide to the Committee on notice the extra resources that have gone in? I know the Minister has made announcements that are there.

All resources are welcome, but their concern is that there are outreach staff through the department who are going out, they're dropping in once a week, doing an hour, hanging around and going, "We're here. Come and talk to us if you've got a problem," and yet Wardell CORE cannot get any financial support to actually support their person who is there 24/7, who has built rapport with a very small community doing it very difficult. I suppose it is a question, first, to you, Dr Bowden, in terms of is there flexibility in the way that you deliver those that you could provide support to Wardell CORE? Secondly, to Mr Fitzsimmons, there are grants available all over the place. How is it possible that a service that is working doesn't seem to be able to access any of that support, to do incredible work that they're currently doing for free but is not sustainable in that way?

**MICHAEL BOWDEN:** I can't speak to the specific question about a specific worker and so on, but I can tell you that for that North Coast area there is \$20 million of funding that is going to recruit a clinical as well as non-clinical workforce in the area. Also the—

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** That's why she is asking the question.

**MICHAEL BOWDEN:** I'm sorry?

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** We know that. That's why she is asking the question.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Why can't some of that funding, for example, be diverted to Wardell CORE and the person who's currently doing that work? There are so many bureaucratic barriers. Putting in your own staff who come in once a week, as good as they are—there is actually someone on site but we just can't seem to get the support that they need. I am just trying to understand what we need to do. Is it a Resilience job? Is it just that you are locked in terms of the way in which your funding is provided? How do we actually do this very small practical thing?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** I think there was a \$20 million or \$25 million mental health package specifically announced by the Government. In that package it was targeted at specialist clinicians, as the doctor indicated, but there were also NGOs that were factored into that, from memory, as part of that funding arrangement that Health would seek to engage. We do have other services and funding envelopes where we connect with non-government organisations and community organisations around recovery support services, and you may have seen just recently an announcement around charities and non-government organisations—

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Just exactly on this, this will be my last thing.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** —for those sorts of groups and organisations to access grants and funding to support those activities but it is not available until 1 July.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Yes, but this needs to be fixed. I have been told overnight that Trees Not Bombs, which is providing food; the Koori Mail, which is providing food; and other services are about to basically cease being able to do that because they are not funded to do that work. The provision of food and the community connection that those organisations are providing is actually providing mental health support in that genuine community way with people that are known to them.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** Correct.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** How do those organisations access government funding support so that they can do the work that they are doing that, frankly, government agencies are trying but are unable to do?

**ELERI MORGAN-THOMAS:** There is a grants program that Minister McLaren-Jones announced two weeks ago that they are eligible to put in an application for.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Have we told them, given that they have just announced they're closing?

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Dr Bowden, I want to ask you about people with mental health issues and addiction issues who get displaced during floods and come into evacuation centres. They get cut off from their doctors and their medications. There is no assistance or support for those people and their behaviours can impact on everyone else in the centre. Would you consider preparing advice for the Government on how to address that problem?

**MICHAEL BOWDEN:** Certainly. We can provide that, but my understanding is that there are mental health workers within the evacuation and the recovery centres who are able to provide support so that people can access medications and so on, and also—

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** I don't understand how you could possibly have that understanding because that wasn't what occurred. I'm sorry. I'm sitting here listening to evidence from people who weren't there, saying things that either I already know or they are just deflecting rather than answering the questions. I'm not targeting anybody personally, but it's immensely frustrating, to hear that there were mental health workers in those evacuation centres, and to hear that stated as a fact to our Committee when it just clearly wasn't the case. These communities were all cut off. Nobody could get out of the Lismore area, with the creeks and the way—everybody gets cut off into pockets, and there was very limited capacity. There were a lot of centres; I get that. I'm just saying that there was no phone number for anyone to ring. There was no registration, so nobody could find out where these people were to match them up with their doctors again, which was a big problem. I am suggesting to you that maybe that void could be an area of policy that could be plugged into Resilience's strategy for managing evacuation centres.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** If I can, Ms Cusack, one of the things that I have engaged is a formal review into the activation of management of evac centres, particularly where they scale up very rapidly beyond the germane local planning and escalate into those major evacuation centre control mechanisms. I did visit Southern Cross University in the middle of the evacuation. I think it was fortuitous. If I remember rightly, a faculty in the university had health or medicine as part of it, so there were people and volunteer doctors there helping with medications, registrations and other general treatments. But the organisation of rescue business, I'm expecting to have that review into the centres in July. So I do believe, with the extraordinary experiences out of this one—

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** I'm just making that suggestion.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** —that there is scope to do things differently. Even some of the traditional non-government organisations that are written into evacuation centre activations, staffing and resourcing, some of them were lucky to have the personnel to get in and attend 30 per cent or 40 per cent of the centres. So there were some real challenges with resourcing and isolation.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** I accept that. This comes off the back of the Hon. Penny Sharpe's questions about Xavier. I will give you another example: Camp Drewe at Lennox Head, which had mentally ill people and addicts and no support. All they wanted was a telephone number they could ring to get assistance. In the end they needed the police. They did a great job, but they are a place that takes school excursions. They don't have a lot of supervision, certainly for people with complex needs. The idea that they had access to mental health support—I'm sorry, but please accept what I am saying. Can people running these evacuation centres who are coopted at least be given some sort of letter that explains what the evacuation centre is, what their role is and what is expected, and give them some contact phone numbers for information and support for those centres? Because none of that information is given. I think everybody accepts that in an unprecedented flood we all have to do more unexpected things, but can't we at least give the owners of the properties and the people who are looking after these people one page of information? Could that be considered?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** I won't proffer the solution now, but that's exactly the sort of thing we are seeking to explore about how that gets better. The other thing I would say is whilst we do need to identify the scale, magnitude and unprecedented nature of this event, the reality is that it's no longer unprecedented. We've got a new benchmark and a new level that we have to leverage and grow from.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** In relation to, I think, the 4,000 people requiring interim housing—I don't know if it's 4,000. I don't think we even know what the number is, but there are thousands of people requiring interim housing. Some of that has been contracted, for example, from holiday parks and those places.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** This is the emergency accommodation at the moment?

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Correct. The term of those contracts was initially three months. Given that there is no alternative plan for those people, these holiday facilities need to take bookings—maybe for the October long weekend or for Christmas—but nobody from the department seems to be able to tell them how long the interim accommodation is going to be needed, and certainly the people using that accommodation have no alternatives. The request from operators is can you at least do three-month contracts? Because they don't want to be caught having to evict victims in order to honour bookings, as occurred last Easter.

**ELERI MORGAN-THOMAS:** I can respond to that one because DCJ does the bookings for those. Some of the camps and holiday parks we have extended to the end of November now, so we have contracts in place for them. We are trying to book as many places as we can, knowing that we will have people in emergency accommodation for some time yet. Some people will move into the pods over time, as they become available, and people will have other options. But we're trying to book through as long as we can. We want to provide certainty to them, and our team in the Housing Contact Centre is on the phone all the time trying to lock in some of those contracts. So we're on the same page; we want the same thing.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** It's just that they were three months initially but then they went to one month, even though the operators had asked for three months?

**ELERI MORGAN-THOMAS:** Yes.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** And someone from the department doorknocked all of the accommodation and told people, "Get ready to leave," but they didn't have anywhere to go to?

**ELERI MORGAN-THOMAS:** I am confident that we are in a better place now than we were even last week or the week before.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Is there an actual plan now for that?

**ELERI MORGAN-THOMAS:** Yes, there's a—

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Is it possible to provide that to the Committee, please?

**ELERI MORGAN-THOMAS:** It's not a plan that is written down as a plan, but Lance might—

**LANCE CARDEN:** I mean, we're literally—

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** What sort of plan is it?

**LANCE CARDEN:** We've got staff literally on the phone all day, every day, ringing providers and extending bookings as far as we can in advance—at this stage right through until November. We've got the motorhomes booked, at this stage, until the end of August, but we can extend beyond then if the demand and the need is still there. As Ms Morgan-Thomas said, the recreation camps are booked long-term as well.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Are they? All of them?

**LANCE CARDEN:** I would have to take on notice the actual date, but I'm pretty sure that we have two of them booked until November.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** It is a sensitive issue because no-one wants to be throwing out flood victims.

**LANCE CARDEN:** No, exactly. I agree.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** But, equally, the community has an important tourism economy and they just need that certainty around—

**LANCE CARDEN:** Yes, agreed.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Fitzsimmons, how many times have you been up to the North Coast since the floods occurred?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** I've probably been up three or four times in the last couple of months.

**The CHAIR:** Can you provide us with the exact dates and the duration—how long you were up there, the arrival time and the departure time?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** Yes, sure.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** Ms Morgan-Thomas, how many people have been displaced by these floods in terms of those who are in need of housing?

**ELERI MORGAN-THOMAS:** We don't have that number. We know how many people are in emergency accommodation and as of last night there was 1,300 and—

**LANCE CARDEN:** Seventy-five.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** Mr Fitzsimmons, do you have that number?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** It's very difficult to accurately provide that number. We do know something like 7,000 people have been provided emergency accommodation and we're still running at that 1,300 or 1,400 figure. The best signals and estimates around interest and expectation for pod-type accommodation going forward, I think, is around 1,500 to 1,700 people. That is the best estimate we can get at the moment, in that longer term period as we transition back to reconstruction. But significant displacement, if you look at 4,000 homes that are uninhabitable and those figures that we're talking about don't include those that are not seeking accommodation.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** This comes back to the question posed by Mr Mark Banasiak earlier about the way in which data is captured. You were saying that you're working on a database, potentially, but that's people who go into recovery centres.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** Or access—

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** So people who are displaced, for example, who have been sleeping in a friend's or a relative's bedroom with their three kids for the last three months, how do you capture those people?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** It's really difficult, ma'am. To give you another example, it's not just recovery centres, we're actually capturing people through the Customer Care line, which is about 120,000 or 130,000 calls so far. In the last month or so, some of our outreach doorknock teams have been going around. I think there's been 90 teams getting through different areas in the Northern Rivers particularly. I think we've doorknocked over 5,000 properties. A figure of below 2,000 have had people at home. Some of the concerning figures, which is not unparalleled in terms of disasters is that about 40 per cent of the people who were doorknocked had not yet gone to a recovery centre or an access point or sought assistance.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** Yes, we heard that figure.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** If we reflect on relatively recent disasters, even at the State recovery committee yesterday, the feedback was that people are coming forward now for the first time to reach out. We saw after the bushfires some people were 12 or 18 months after displacement or disruption before they were of a

mindset to be willing to speak up and start accessing and utilising services. It is very difficult and complex. You can't put a fixed number on it.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** That is only a certain number of households that you have gone to. Clearly there is a lot more, given what's happening with the households where people weren't there. What lessons has Resilience NSW learned by that doorknock? What will you do differently? How many more houses is Resilience NSW going to the doorknock? Clearly you did it too late and you're not doing enough, I would suggest.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** I would challenge that proposition. What I mean by that is we have never seen a volume or a visitation to recovery centres and access points like we have seen. The last figure I saw was like 45,000 visits across the recovery centres and access points. We have a volume of more than 100,000 calls coming into the call centre. Doorknocking and outreach is a phased approach to what occurs in any disasters, in any case. Even things like recovery support services and other mechanisms that seek to get in, understand and connect with communities—the commitment that the Government has given and that is still in place now is that anybody needs emergency accommodation will be provided it, but we need to know where those needs are and who those people are in need. Importantly, there is an open connection about trying to secure the medium-term housing option with pods and other arrangements. We are also looking at other flexibility into areas like Woodburn and the one just further north—

**LANCE CARDEN:** Coraki.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** No, further.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Coraki.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** No, down near Woodburn.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** Broadwater?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** Broadwater, the ability to put pods in there in highly susceptible flood areas. We're looking at caravans to be on people's—there are a whole bunch of other arrangements connecting with people. It's understandable in trauma that people want to connect with their home. They want to connect with their home and they want to be with their home, notwithstanding the state of that home.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** When Resilience NSW started doorknocking, you are saying that was a planned time. Say you started two months in, for example—you can correct that, if you like—whatever time you started, that's in your plan to only start doorknocking two months in and to go around—

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** You don't put a specific time on these things. I mean, it—

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** Resilience NSW did not do it soon enough. You weren't in there, doorknocking on homes two weeks in.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** With respect, you have to focus on the phases and the priorities. With so much visitation and so much presentation to recovery centres, our resourcing—and it's not just Resilience NSW staff. It's all the partner agencies, the surge resources from across government and non-government organisations that help us resource and manage things like recovery centres, access points, mobile service and outreach services into discrete communities, and then another phase to get out is actually the detailed doorknocking. As I said, the last figures I saw were up over 5,000 doorknocks, and there will be more continuing.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** The data we are capturing now, will that be available for if and when we have another event so that information doesn't need to be recycled? Is there any overlap between people who were assisted during the fires and have we been able to draw some of that data into this? The first part is probably the most important part of the question.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** The simple answer is yes. Yes, we have sought to correlate data. What's interesting, particularly from our animal agricultural functional area reporting to the recovery committee this week, with the compounding effects of disasters up north in the last couple of years—drought, fires, COVID, storms and floods—60 per cent of the applications are not experienced before people go through that arrangement. They've endured, endured, endured. This event is one of the breaking points. The idea is to continue to share that data. Your earlier question—the formal project on the "Tell your story once" body of work commenced in November 2021. The alpha phase has been resolved. Things like customer journey maps and blueprints and those sorts of things have been worked through. The beta version, the "Go live" minimal viable product is expected to be available in September.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** With the information we've already captured in that.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** Don't hold me to that. But I'll find out. That's one of the main reasons we've partnered with Service NSW. Increasingly, their ability to capture a customer in the system means we don't have to retrace the customer. Once they've identified their credentials and who they are, accessing grants through a consistent platform will assist in alleviating that duplicated effort and that anxiety of repeating your circumstances to different arms of government, over and over again.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Communities like Wardell that get cut off and don't have any services have suggested that we should be predesignating an evacuation centre for those communities but also that there should be a package of things including potentially a satellite dish or a set of equipment in these predesignated centres, which would mean everyone in the community would know where to go. There'd be a little checklist. What do you think about going down that track of getting communities to know what to do in terms of where to evacuate?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** I think it's a great idea. What I would say to support that is already local emergency management committees seek to pre-identify and designate their evacuation centres and locations throughout their collection of local government areas. There are general criteria around the amenity and suitability of those facilities to seek to be—what's the word? Endorsed?

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Accredited.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** Accredited as an evacuation centre. If there are other things that we think are practicable to look at what ought to be included as minimum viable amenity and functionality then, yes, absolutely, we should be open to that.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** I don't know why that wasn't done for Wardell, which is a river town. It's in Ballina shire. I assume they're shire-based committees. Are they?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** Yes. They're very locally focused and—

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Can I just ask you to look at the work that they've done? There are gaps would be my—

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** Absolutely.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Because we don't register the victims that come into the evac centres—right?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** We do register customers that come in—

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** People!

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Customers? They're victims, actually.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** —but it doesn't necessarily mean you register everybody.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Now we're out doorknocking to try and find them, to try and connect them to support, because they've gone back everywhere.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** Correct.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Are you at least now registering these people as victims as you're going around? The reason I ask is that everybody, from non-governments to every other government agency—if a bona fide flood victim could just say, "Here's my card. I'm a flood victim. There's that number," that would just make everybody's life so much easier in administering during the emergency and recovery. Do you see what I'm saying?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** So you would give them—

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** All these donated goods that Vinnies are handing out. People just walk in off the streets, start helping themselves. To just be able to say, "I'm a"—obviously, attendance at an evac centre is good evidence.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** And, certainly, recovery centres as well, attendance at all those different centres. Then we've got the—

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** But you're not registering them and case managing them from evac or from recovery. Now we've got doorknocking out there. We have to do outreach to try to find them because we know they're not getting help. At least in this investment by the Government to do the doorknocking—I'm glad it's being done. Are we maximising it by now at least registering the victims so that we can follow them up?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** Let me take that on notice. I don't know specifically about the registration details. I know we provide guidance and support and we point them in the direction of either the online or telephone services. There are a range of reasons why people don't visit centres or seek support at that stage, but they generally come down into broad categories of "I thought it was an evacuation centre. I didn't realise there was a difference between evac and recovery centres." So we're getting access to people to have options then to connect and register, and we also have them on a list of people that need food, support and other things that we provide as well.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Doesn't it worry you, though, that anybody could attend an evacuation centre and spend maybe a week there and leave the centre not understanding the difference between an evacuation centre and a recovery centre? You've had them there for a week and there's none of this information about what to expect, what the next steps are and where the support is.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** I think the evac centre space is a very difficult and traumatic space. I agree with you that it would be nice if everyone knew and understood the differences. But I think we have to look at that through a lens of significant displacement and trauma, where people are just focused on—

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** I just see it as an opportunity to give people information.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** I agree.

**The CHAIR:** Time has expired for this session. We will reconvene at 1.00 p.m.

**(The witnesses withdrew.)**

**(Luncheon adjournment)**

**Mr SHANE FITZSIMMONS**, Commissioner, Resilience NSW

**Ms CATHERINE ELLIS**, Executive Director, Risk, Strategy and Performance, Service NSW, sworn and examined

**Mr SEAN O'CONNELL**, Chief Executive Officer, Rural Assistance Authority, Department of Regional NSW, before the Committee via videoconference, sworn and examined

**Ms JOANN WILKIE**, Deputy Secretary, Economic Strategy & Productivity, NSW Treasury, affirmed and examined

**The CHAIR:** Under the standing orders there is provision for an opening statement. Would anyone like to make an opening statement?

**JOANN WILKIE:** No, thank you.

**CATHERINE ELLIS:** No, thank you.

**SEAN O'CONNELL:** No, thank you, Chair.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** I want to ask about the flood recovery rental support payments. Ms Ellis, can I just confirm that the amount allocated for the 16-week payment for people affected by the floods was approximately \$248 million?

**CATHERINE ELLIS:** I am not familiar with the total amount allocated to that at a program level.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** The rental support grant program?

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Flood recovery rental support, yes.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** I will clarify that while you ask your question.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** I have a media release that said that that is what it was. There have been a number of figures thrown around, so I want to make sure that I am talking about the right thing. Aside from that, can I confirm that as of today applications for that program are at 11,719?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** So \$248 million is the program announcement for the rental support scheme.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Yes, it is. Can I confirm that applications close on 24 June? Is that right?

**CATHERINE ELLIS:** For the rental support payment, applications currently close on 24 June with consideration being given to an extension at the moment.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** There are nine days to go. Can I confirm that so far you have received 11,719 applications for that program?

**CATHERINE ELLIS:** I have figures as at yesterday, so 14 June. The figures that I have are 11,667 applications made in that program to a value of \$109.6 million.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** We are very close. I am using the figures that are on the website as of today.

**The CHAIR:** As of 10 minutes ago.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Yes, correct. Can I confirm that of those around 11,700 applications, 7,476 have been found to be ineligible?

**CATHERINE ELLIS:** Yes, I have 7,468 ineligible.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** We are close. And it is around \$70 million?

**CATHERINE ELLIS:** Yes.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Basically, out of all of that, around 1,937 applications have been paid out, valued at \$17.7 million. Are those your figures?

**CATHERINE ELLIS:** Yes. Again, we are very close. I have 1,869 applications and \$17.2 million.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Essentially it is 16 weeks since this happened and there was an allocation of \$248 million, but only around \$18 million—to be generous—has been paid to people to support them in their rentals. Is that correct?

**CATHERINE ELLIS:** That's right.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** And the program is due to close in nine days?

**CATHERINE ELLIS:** At the moment, yes, it is due to close.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Do you think it is acceptable that almost 12,000 people have looked for help, yet less than 2,000 have received it?

**CATHERINE ELLIS:** We have 7,468 applications declined due to ineligibility. We have 1,116 applications where we are waiting for further information from customers.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** My figures show that just under 4,000 are in assessment and waiting. But let's be clear, for people who have actually had money in their bank account to support them through this process, only around 1,900 people have received that.

**CATHERINE ELLIS:** They are the applications that we have found to be eligible in our assessment.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** How is it possible that a grants system designed to help people in desperate need—living in mouldy houses, wet tents or, if they are lucky, a caravan—has only been able to pay out 16 per cent of those who sought help?

**CATHERINE ELLIS:** We assess applications on the eligibility criteria. That is the number that have been found eligible.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** What is making people ineligible? Why are people ineligible?

**CATHERINE ELLIS:** I do have some information on that to assist the Committee. I know that in a great number of cases—I've got it here. In 63 per cent of cases customers have been unable to demonstrate that they've been impacted by the floods.

**The CHAIR:** Whoa! Wait a second.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** When they say they're unable to, is that because they don't have paperwork and they're unable to access their files because of the flood damage?

**CATHERINE ELLIS:** In a great many cases we're finding images that have come from Google or they're re-occurring through multiple applications. So they cannot provide—

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Sorry. We'll leave that aside because that is the fraud line. About 7 per cent are under fraud review, but that's only 856 of the 11,719. We spent a number of days with people on the North Coast two weeks ago where the level of frustration and distress as a result of being asked for paperwork that they no longer have was extraordinary. We had the Chief Psychiatrist in the last session and I just cannot overstate the level of trauma within the community about this. How is it possible that a grants system has been designed where 64 per cent of the people who apply for it aren't eligible because they can't provide the paperwork because it was washed away in the floods? How is that going to be overcome?

**CATHERINE ELLIS:** So if I may just address your comments in relation to the fraudulent applications—

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** No. I don't want to talk about fraud. I want to talk about the people who've applied in good faith because they are in desperate circumstances. They are in desperate circumstances in terms of their housing and they've been told they're ineligible because they can't provide the paperwork. I want to talk about them. I don't want to talk about the people doing the wrong thing. It's a tiny proportion. The vast majority—64 per cent—of people who applied have been told they're not eligible. I want to know how many of them is because they can't provide the paperwork that you're demanding because they don't have it anymore because it's been washed away.

**CATHERINE ELLIS:** We have alternatives for customers in that situation. So—

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** But you tell them that they're ineligible. So when they've told—okay. We met people who are in this circumstance last week. Their house and their business have been completely washed away. All of their electronic data is also destroyed. They might have their driver's licence with them, if they're lucky, and a few of their bank cards and those kinds of things, but they have no ability to provide you with the paperwork. So, if they're lucky, they're told they should apply for rental support and the Government comes out and trumpets there's going to be 16 weeks' worth of support for people; you just need to apply. When they apply and they don't have the paperwork, at what point do you tell them that they're ineligible?

**CATHERINE ELLIS:** Customers who are in severely impacted suburbs don't need to provide us with photographs, but there are other eligibility requirements. Customers have 28 days, typically, to provide us with any documentation to support their application.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** What happens if they don't have documents?

**The CHAIR:** But, ma'am, they have no documentation. Everything, including their lives, has been washed away. So they have 28 days to provide non-existent documentation. What steps does the New South Wales Government take into consideration that people who had their lives destroyed by flood do not have documentation to prove that they've been washed away by flood? Isn't simply being in the community that has had the worst flood in New South Wales enough? I put it to you that flood support and support from this Government is a cruel hoax and that you have no intention of providing support.

**CATHERINE ELLIS:** In this case there are nearly 1,900 customers who have been supported in this grant and many more have been supported to access other grants. We at Service NSW assess applications on the policy and guidelines that are set.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Okay. That's great. How many assessors have you had—and let's just talk about Lismore and leave aside the others. We'll just talk about Lismore. How many assessors from Service NSW are currently on the ground in Lismore?

**CATHERINE ELLIS:** In terms of on the ground in Lismore, we are running flood support sessions at the moment. We ran a week of those sessions.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** How many staff do you have?

**CATHERINE ELLIS:** We would have around 10 or 20 assessors on the ground this week in between Lismore and Casino.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** When you say "assessors", are they going door to door?

**CATHERINE ELLIS:** No. They're running support sessions in two locations: Lismore and Casino. We also ran sessions for all of last week and there are sessions happening late next week in Evans Head to support the Evans Head community and surrounding communities.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** When did those sessions start?

**CATHERINE ELLIS:** They started last week.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** So 15 weeks in, people are getting information on a program that's about to close within a fortnight?

**CATHERINE ELLIS:** From the very early days Service NSW has had people on the ground supporting customers in the disaster centres and through our mobile service centres.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** If someone was in a disaster centre—I'm not quite sure whether that's a recovery centre or an evacuation centre.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** It's a recovery centre.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Okay. So they're there. They talk to a Service NSW person. They've got no paperwork. Let's just say they meet that. What happens with the information that they provide? Are they approved on the spot or is there a process that they have to go through? Does this information have to go back to Sydney to get approval?

**CATHERINE ELLIS:** For a customer in that situation, there are a couple of things. There are collocated services there in the disaster centre. For example, the council is there. Services Australia is there—

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Sorry, Ms Ellis. I'm really asking for a very specific answer here, which is directly the role of Service NSW, who are responsible for assessing and getting this money into the hands of people who are in desperate situations. What I'm trying to understand is how many people you have in Lismore at the moment that someone can go to, tell their story to, and provide with—if they're lucky—the information that they need to get the tick to get that money in their bank account. Because, as I've said, just over 15 per cent of people have been able to achieve that.

I'm just trying to understand how many people you've got and whether the assessment is taking too long because it's going backwards and forwards between Sydney and Lismore—we had people crying in front of us about being asked to provide the same documentation five times that either they don't have or is incomplete

because their house and business has washed away. Can you tell me how many assessors you've got on the ground in Lismore who can approve a grant so that it goes into someone's bank account within two or three days?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** With the blitz forums that Ms Ellis is talking about, there's a combination of teams and they're looking at a variety of grants. Some can be confirmed and ratified in—

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Can you take on notice which ones those are?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** Well, no. It depends on the person's circumstances. It's about appointments and people coming in to work through grants and materials. Then some of those grants are processed and resolved in situ and others are followed up to be progressed further and resolved on behalf of the customer thereafter—is my understanding of how they're working, particularly in these targeted centres right now.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Do you have a flowchart or anything in terms of the decision-making process? I'm just talking about this grant. We can get into the whole grants but I'm going to run out of time. But just this grant—is there a flowchart that shows the decision-making in relation to what people need to provide, working through the eligibility, and that also demonstrates who does the final sign-off?

**CATHERINE ELLIS:** I don't have that information in front of me.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** I'm happy for you to take it on notice.

**CATHERINE ELLIS:** Yes.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** That would be great.

**The CHAIR:** I've noticed that you've done a customer satisfaction survey. It claims that 91 per cent of people who participate in this process are satisfied with the way the process is occurring. How does one reach that conclusion when less than 15 per cent of support is getting out? I'm just curious. This, again as I said earlier, appears to be a cruel hoax. You're saying that 91 per cent of people are satisfied with the process but only 15 per cent are actually getting desperately needed funds. At the public forums, we had young mothers on the verge of tears, with no income whatsoever coming into their homes—and they were clearly homeless due to the floods. They talked about being re-interviewed and re-interviewed and being re-interviewed and re-interviewed five times. What is happening, and what steps are you taking to fix this so that support flows to the community?

**CATHERINE ELLIS:** I'm not sure about the interview process. We don't typically interview customers who are applying for grants unless they seek an appointment with us face to face. The application process is predominantly online. We are always very happy to receive feedback from customers, both online through the application experience, which I think is the customer satisfaction numbers you're referring to, but through other forums as well. We can always welcome feedback on how we can improve things, and I think we've continued to do that during the delivery of these grants.

**The CHAIR:** Do you believe the 91 per cent satisfaction rate? Do you honestly believe that figure?

**CATHERINE ELLIS:** Well, I'd need to speak to customers but, principally, it is feedback that's come back from customers who have completed the application.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** I want to quickly go to the Rural Assistance Authority grant. Mr O'Connell, is that you?

**SEAN O'CONNELL:** Yes, Ms Sharpe.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Can you confirm for me the total amount allocated to the Rural Assistance Authority Special Disaster Grants?

**SEAN O'CONNELL:** Thanks for the question. Possibly the commissioner is going to have the most accurate figure in relation to that. I can say that the Rural Assistance Authority is delivering two programs—

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** No, that's okay. Look, Mr O'Connell—sorry, I'm just running out of time and I want to get to this particular point. I'll come back to what the total number is, but can I just confirm again that around 18,810 applications have been received for that program?

**SEAN O'CONNELL:** As of midnight last night, the number for the Special Disaster Grant program was 3,056.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** My apologies, I was reading off the wrong table. There have been 3,056 applications and 1,507 have been completed. Is that correct?

**SEAN O'CONNELL:** That's correct.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Can you tell me how many of those have been approved?

**SEAN O'CONNELL:** I can, if you don't mind me just looking at another dashboard, please. Of those, 1,244 have been approved, which is approximately, I believe, about 82 per cent.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Of the ones that are completed. But overall, that's not correct, is it?

**SEAN O'CONNELL:** That's an excellent point. In relation to those received, I can tell you that approved is—

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** About 40 per cent?

**SEAN O'CONNELL:** Correct.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Thank you. Will you take on notice, are we able to get the full amount that's supposed to go out in that program?

**SEAN O'CONNELL:** Commissioner? I think it's in the order of—the funding was allocated by ERC in stages. So I have—

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** I can indicate, Ms Sharpe, the program. If we're talking about the primary producer grant, we're talking about \$221.8 million notionally allocated to support that package. That's up to \$75,000 for primary producers.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Yes. Just to be clear, how much has been paid out?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** There may be a more accurate figure, but my last figure that I've got is just under \$16 million.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** That's \$16 million out of \$221 million?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** That's the figure I've got. I'd have to speak to RAA.

**SEAN O'CONNELL:** Commissioner, \$17.8 million has been disbursed.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** Okay. So, yes, a couple of million different—

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** That's \$17 million out of \$221 million. Right. Thank you very much.

**SEAN O'CONNELL:** But, Ms Sharpe, I'll just make the point that \$74 million has been approved in principle. The way that grant works is we pay \$15,000 in an up-front grant.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** Correct, yes.

**SEAN O'CONNELL:** Upon approval, a primary producer receives \$15,000. The balance, the majority of that \$17.8 million, is that funding going out the door in up-front grants of \$15,000.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Mr O'Connell, is that \$75,000 Federal money that you're administering on behalf of the Federal Government, or is that State money?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** It's funding under the Disaster Relief Account arrangements, which is co-contributed between the State and the Commonwealth but administered through New South Wales and RAA.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** And that was one of two funding buckets that you are administering?

**SEAN O'CONNELL:** Thank you, Mr Barrett. Yes, we're delivering two programs: a Special Disaster Grant, which is for primary producers, up to \$75,000; and a newer program which has come into effect since the Black Summer bushfires which is called a Rural Landholders Grant, which is for those people who do not otherwise meet the 50 per cent on-farm income criteria for the Special Disaster Grant.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Who sets that 50 per cent criteria?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** That's agreed criteria between the Commonwealth and the State. Again, the one that you're referring to now, the landholder support package, is another co-contributed grant, on which we need to get agreement with the Commonwealth on the criteria.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** So the definition of a primary producer being that 50 per cent of the income has to be from on farm—where does that originate?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** That's the legacy of the DRFA funding arrangements.

**SEAN O'CONNELL:** Exactly, Commissioner. Thank you. Mr Barrett, it's been a longstanding measure in the Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements which the commissioner refers to. It's accepted right across

Australia, and the Commonwealth obviously has to manage this program not just in New South Wales but in Queensland and all the other States impacted by this event. They're the standing definitions for a primary producer that exist in Australia under the DRFA.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** When was the trigger pulled as far as the full declaration here? That's part of that—

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** Sorry, what do you mean by the question?

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** When was the declaration made that this money would be made available?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** This was done very early on, within days of the disaster being declared. It would have been literally in days. A lot of these grants and support packages are anywhere from days, weeks or months ahead of previous disasters—certainly six weeks or more ahead of the 2017 floods in Northern Rivers, and days and weeks ahead of where we were only 12 months ago with the Mid Coast and Hawkesbury-Nepean floods. They've been done extremely quickly.

The other important thing to note, which my colleague will validate, is that the New South Wales Government particularly has sought and has been able to secure adjustments to these off-the-shelf items to lower documentation for getting out \$15K up front, for example, as low doc loans and different arrangements for the balance up to \$75,000. The Government is continuing to pursue further easing on that with the Commonwealth, and we're waiting on replies in that regard. The landholder support package, as is indicated, is fairly new to support those that don't meet those other thresholds, and it pays up to \$25,000.

**SEAN O'CONNELL:** That's exactly the case. Thank you, Commissioner. Just following on from the commissioner's point, it wasn't that long ago in New South Wales that the only assistance a primary producer could expect to get would be from a category C declaration. In that situation, the maximum amount a primary producer would have got would have been \$15,000. Following the first ever declaration of a Category D event following the Black Summer bushfires, the same quantum of funds has been available for the flooding event in February-March last year, in November last year and then again in February this year.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** That's correct.

**SEAN O'CONNELL:** There's a quantum of funds. As the commissioner also mentioned, the Rural Landholders Grant is specifically designed for people who, for various personal circumstances based on their financial details, do not qualify for the \$75,000 grant process but they can claim up to \$25,000. In our view, it's a safety net for genuine landholders who have incurred damage to their property.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** As I mentioned earlier, and my colleague Mr O'Connell will confirm this, interestingly up in the Northern Rivers particularly, RAA animal and agriculture are seeing 40 per cent of new customers which have not been on their books before with the primary producers grant and 60 per cent of customers for the support grant that haven't been on their books before. It is indicative of the compounding effects of disasters and events that have really challenged a lot of primary producers over the last few years particularly. Is that a fair summary, Mr O'Connell?

**SEAN O'CONNELL:** I think that's an excellent point. The RAA has been in response mode since the drought. We moved very quickly from drought to Black Summer bushfires, then to floods. We had a mouse plague and another two rounds of flooding. The fact that 40 per cent of our customers for the Special Disaster Grant are presenting to us for the first time demonstrates the significance of this event compared to every other event. Put yourself in the situation of a primary producer who has managed to survive those previous shocks only to present as a result of this event. I think that shows the scale of it. But, as the commissioner said, we have been able to stand up this. We opened the Special Disaster Grant from 4 March and at that point, as you'll know, the rains were still falling and the rivers were still rising so we've got—

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Can I just jump in? I'm conscious I'm going to run out of time soon. One question I did want to ask, Mr O'Connell, is, the 60 per cent that we have touched before, is that grant application process quicker because you have dealt with them before, because you have that information on file?

**SEAN O'CONNELL:** That's an excellent question, Mr Barrett. The short answer is yes.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Awesome. I love the short answer.

**SEAN O'CONNELL:** We have a form of pre-qualification for people who we've got details of, that the financial records require. If I can put it into perspective, an assessment for one of those customers, an existing customer takes about 40 minutes to an hour. For a newer customer for whom we don't have that requisite level of financial information, that can take three to four hours just to go through the assessment process. Quite often, as

Ms Ellis referred to in other grants programs, we do have to wait for those customers to come back with additional information. If I look at the dashboard today, we've got about 500 or so customers who we are waiting for additional information from.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Great. Ms Ellis, just quickly before my time goes, the documentation that people need to present, are there some standard documents there that could be kept on file before an event so that if I live in a flood zone I could have these certain documents ready to go or filed somewhere electronically that would expedite the process should there be an event?

**The Hon. ROD ROBERTS:** Like a register.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Yes, almost a register of this is where I live, here are my details—should there be an event, this is what I need.

**CATHERINE ELLIS:** Yes, certainly there's standard documentation that is required to evidence eligibility that customers need to call on when they're making a grant application, and whilst we support customers in every way we possibly can to access that information, whether it's with their consent seeking it from another organisation or supporting them to access that information in person, of course it is of assistance if customers have that information already. I believe the Government has also made representations to the Commonwealth to proactively seek more tax information, for example, to assist customers. Where there's a requirement around turnover or income, we can be proactively seeking information from the Commonwealth rather than asking that customer to provide us with a tax return or some other information around their business activities.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Does the New South Wales Government support the Commonwealth definition of a farmer satisfying the ATO's definition? This is causing a lot of problems in the Northern Rivers.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** I don't know the answer to your question off the top of my head.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** If you could take that on notice, because there's a lot of complaints about it. I think people would love to know—

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** Do they recognise a farmer as per the ATO's definition?

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Yes, which means that a majority of their income is coming from the property, not off-farm. So anybody whose wife is working as a teacher because the farm is losing money, their property won't qualify and they're not qualifying for these grants. The community would love to have some awareness of this amongst Resilience, and for some effort to be made to assist them with that problem.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** I think with the Feds—and Mr O'Connell will confirm this—their definition in relation to primary producer grants is you've got to demonstrate more than 50 per cent.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Correct. That's known as the ATO definition.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** That's the Commonwealth criteria definition.

**SEAN O'CONNELL:** That's correct.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Correct. My question relates to whether the New South Wales Government is trying to assist our community by seeking to make that definition more flexible.

**SEAN O'CONNELL:** Commissioner, I can assist Ms Cusack there.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Thank you for taking that on notice. If the answer is no, you're not helping, that's fine.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** No, that's not the answer.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** If it's yes—

**SEAN O'CONNELL:** The answer is yes, Ms Cusack. We are assisting. I'm coming to you from Orange today because the RAA board is meeting just across the room. The very matter they are discussing currently is how we can better improve the definition of "primary producer".

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** That's really urgent for these victims. Thank you for that. Has fraud been detected in applications for grants?

**CATHERINE ELLIS:** I can respond in relation to the grants that Service NSW is assessing. Yes, fraud is unfortunately detected in all of our grants programs.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Thank you for that answer. Do you then refer that to the police?

**CATHERINE ELLIS:** Yes, we do. We go through a process internally. Our fraud team investigates applications containing fraudulent characteristics. When we are satisfied that, on the face of it, it looks to be fraudulent to us, we will get a package of information together to refer to the police.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** You may wish to take these on notice: How many referrals have been made, how many cases have been investigated and how many prosecutions have been launched? The reason I take an interest in that is because I would love to see somebody go to jail because these fraudulent applications are gumming everything up and it would be very helpful. I realise you're not the police, but I would appreciate that information.

**CATHERINE ELLIS:** That's fine. I actually have that here.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Okay, thank you.

**CATHERINE ELLIS:** I will clarify the grants that I am referring to: the rental support grant, which has been the subject of conversation today; the flood recovery \$50,000 small business grant, the Back Home grant; and the \$10,000 small business northern flood grant. Across those four grants we have a total number of 5,832 suspected fraudulent applications to a value of \$65.2 million. Of that, \$815,000 is paid and \$64.4 million is unpaid. So we've intercepted it before we've paid it. In terms of the referrals to the police, we have referred 32 paid applications and 866 unpaid applications. Often there's a syndicate or group arrangement where there's related parties, or what appear to be related parties. My information is that one charge has been laid in relation to a rental support grant, 21 charges have been laid in relation to the \$50,000 small business grant and one charge has been laid in relation to—sorry, three charges for that grant and there have been two convictions to date in relation to the \$50,000 small business grant, relating to applications of value \$27,000—

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Thank you, that's really great to hear. I suggest that the Government considers publicising those cases, because these people are rats and it would assist to reduce the number of people thinking of doing it. I need to move on. My next question relates to an email that the Committee received—that I've tabled and I think you've got a copy—from Chinderah Village Tourist Park, which is a holiday and permanent caravan park. It concerns the case of a young man, his wife and one-year-old baby, who lost everything in the flood and applied for a \$5,000 grant to return home. I understand that you can't comment on the actual details of the case, but do you think that this family would have been offered a customer feedback opportunity on the management of this issue?

**CATHERINE ELLIS:** All customers who complete the application have that opportunity to provide feedback.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** In the reply that they've been sent, which is an automated reply and doesn't really offer them the opportunity to contact anybody, there isn't a customer feedback opportunity provided to them.

**CATHERINE ELLIS:** I'm very happy to have a closer look at this application and to reach out to this customer.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Yes, thank you very much.

**CATHERINE ELLIS:** I won't comment on the specifics, but I do know that in relation to this application it was approved on 31 May.

**The Hon. ROD ROBERTS:** After we visited, would that be right?

**The Hon. MARK BANASIAK:** Pure coincidence.

**The CHAIR:** That would be after our conversation with her.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** I'm sorry, was this referred to you by our Committee? How did you come to revisit it?

**CATHERINE ELLIS:** I think the email that you've provided to us here is—I'm just looking at it now for the first time. It looks like it was received 18 May and, without looking into it further, I suspect that there has been a reapplication or some sort of assistance provided to the customer and that we've approved that subsequently.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** That email is dated 18 May and the subject is "Your Flood Individuals Support Package application has not been approved". Could you let us know, on notice, what actually occurred that resulted in that change in position?

**CATHERINE ELLIS:** Certainly.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** It is, obviously, great news for them, and it may be helpful for our Committee to know what happened. The concern that I have is with these automated rejections to flood victims, for whatever reason. I assume that you don't have any further questions of them. If they've not provided documentation you keep contacting them to provide more documentation. Is that correct?

**CATHERINE ELLIS:** Yes, it is.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** At what point do you reject their applications?

**CATHERINE ELLIS:** I think it's under the Commonwealth guidelines, customers are generally provided with 28 days to provide us with further information. During that time, we contact customers at least three times with reminders and also telephone them. We may also interact with them if they present to a service centre or in some other way engage with our service. Any customer who needs further time is provided with further time. Quite often customers will say, "I just need a bit more time" or, typically, they may also have a concurrent insurance claim where they're waiting to see what that might pay and, therefore, what they might claim from one of these grants. So there is always the opportunity for further time for any customer that needs it. At the moment, while we're providing the dedicated support sessions up in the Northern Rivers, we actually have all of our applications open indefinitely.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** How many have been terminated after 28 days where they didn't provide that additional information?

**CATHERINE ELLIS:** Excuse me and I will get that information for you. In relation to the storm and flood business grant, which is the \$50,000 grant, we have a range of circumstances. In roughly a third of cases, customers will withdraw the application themselves. That will typically be after we have had a conversation with them following up on information, and they might decide that they are not wanting to continue their application and they will withdraw it.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Do you know the timeout ones?

**CATHERINE ELLIS:** I would have to come back to you on the ones where we have actually—

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Sure.

**The CHAIR:** Your time has expired, Catherine. Thank you.

**The Hon. MARK BANASIAK:** I will be quick. I would ask that if you don't have the answer to hand to just take it on notice. The special disaster grants, Mr O'Connell, you didn't say how many people have received the further \$65,000. Do you have that figure?

**SEAN O'CONNELL:** I will come back to you, Mr Banasiak.

**The Hon. MARK BANASIAK:** Thank you. Can I go to the supply chain grants, which is another set of grants that you administer? How many people have applied, how many have received it and how many have been declined?

**SEAN O'CONNELL:** For the event in question here, that program is opening in the coming weeks, Mr Banasiak.

**The Hon. MARK BANASIAK:** Your website says it closes 30 June.

**SEAN O'CONNELL:** That's referring to the February-March 2021 event.

**The Hon. MARK BANASIAK:** Right. Okay. Excellent.

**SEAN O'CONNELL:** I have data on that, if you wish [disorder].

**The Hon. MARK BANASIAK:** No, that's fine. Can I go to the actual industries that are involved? How come the timber industry isn't involved when we clearly see from this flood event that they were also deeply affected, particularly the mills? They aren't able to get the supply of timber because they can't get the forestry workers in there. Why aren't they included in this grant?

**SEAN O'CONNELL:** I think, to be accurate, they are included in other programs not offered by the RAA.

**The Hon. MARK BANASIAK:** Ms Ellis, can you provide a copy of the customer survey questions? I'm not asking for the individual responses, just a blank set of survey questions, so we can gauge what exactly people were asked.

**CATHERINE ELLIS:** Yes.

**The Hon. MARK BANASIAK:** Thank you. Mr Fitzsimmons, can I go back to the State plan? I draw your attention to page 24 where it says, "NSW SES will provide"—

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** Sorry, which State plan are you on?

**The Hon. MARK BANASIAK:** The State Flood Plan, sorry, I was talking about in previous sessions. It says:

NSW SES will provide information to Resilience NSW to support applications to Treasury for Natural Disaster Relief ...

Can you explain to us how adding Resilience NSW in the middle there to then go talk to Treasury makes the process more expedient or faster? It just seems like we're adding another layer of bureaucracy. Shouldn't SES just go straight to Treasury and say, "We need more money"?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** No, it is streamlined. Resilience is effectively the bank for the State that holds the disaster relief account and the disaster funding for all events in New South Wales. We also, on behalf of the State, broker the dial-up with the Commonwealth around declaring natural disasters, natural disaster declarations and declared areas. What all the subsequent funding and support packages that come to bear, in partnership with the Commonwealth and/or some other packages that have been announced—the \$3.5 billion over the last few weeks—some of those are 100 per cent State funded. It's actually about—we are the single point for coordination of the disaster relief funding arrangements for the State and connecting with the Commonwealth, and we channel that through our Minister for Emergency Services and Resilience.

**The Hon. MARK BANASIAK:** If you are the bank, and the Treasury is not the bank, how much do you have in your bank account?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** Our budget at the moment, based on the variations of the last few months, would be close to \$1.2 billion holding moneys, principally around disaster relief arrangements for the State.

**The Hon. MARK BANASIAK:** Obviously that's separate to your funding to run Resilience NSW.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** Yes, our funding to run the agency is—

**The Hon. MARK BANASIAK:** That's separate.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** It's captured in that \$1.2 billion, but about 90-odd per cent is all grants and funding—DRA protected money—and nothing to do with our day-to-day operating. So we host it as part of our budget.

**The Hon. ROD ROBERTS:** Ms Ellis, would I be safe in assuming that the 91 per cent satisfaction rate in the survey is only those who have bothered to reply to the survey? So if I don't reply to the survey, I don't get captured, do I?

**CATHERINE ELLIS:** I would need to take on notice whether it is actually a requirement to respond to it. I'm not sure that it is, but I'm not sure either way. I will need to take that on notice.

**The Hon. ROD ROBERTS:** I'll bat up another question. I don't know whether it is to you or Mr Fitzsimmons. Whoever is most appropriate can answer it. I have figures here that as of 20 May Resilience NSW had received a total of 2,253 applications for Disaster Relief Grants. Applications for Disaster Relief Grants often consist of both essential household contents grants and structural grants. As at 20 May—nearly three months after the flood event—only 215 grant applications had been approved. So that is less than 10 per cent, three months deep. Can you shed some light on that for us?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** Yes, I can. Disaster Relief Grants—or DRG, as it is often referred to—is a standing arrangement in New South Wales under joint funding arrangements between the State and the Commonwealth that provides support and assistance to the lowest income earners in society and those with generally no assets or insurance—that sort of thing. Working with individuals and families, they typically align with three categories of support and assistance. One is around furniture and furnishings to replace in a household. The second element is the furnishings and furniture in a household—contents—as well as undertaking structural repairs to get a dwelling, a home, back to a safe and habitable state following some damage from disaster. The third aspect that can extend is that we can actually rebuild or replace a home for people who meet particular thresholds of eligibility—that is, low income earners in desperate need of assistance.

**The Hon. ROD ROBERTS:** That's gone nowhere near answering my question or my proposition, Mr Fitzsimmons. I ask you to be relevant.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** What's the question?

**The Hon. ROD ROBERTS:** We have 2,253 applications from people who you have just now told us are the most vulnerable. They are the most socio-economically deprived people who need the assistance of what is known as the Essential Household Contents Grant. As of 20 May, 215 of those grants had been approved out of 2,253 applications—less than 10 per cent of the most vulnerable people for what is called Essential Household Contents Grants. Is that a satisfactory level, do you think?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** That figure has changed, obviously.

**The Hon. ROD ROBERTS:** No, I'm not asking about the changed figure. Listen to my question. As of 20 May—

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** I will answer it.

**The Hon. ROD ROBERTS:** I ask you to be directly relevant to the question.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** I don't have the figures in front of me for 20 May. But what I will say is the total quantum of grants in the DRG is closer to 2,500. About 50 per cent of those—

**The Hon. ROD ROBERTS:** I've already told you that. It's 2,253.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** I'm trying to answer. About 50 per cent of those grants relate to seeking support for structural assistance—repair assistance—and we've paid out around about 470, 480 amounts at the moment, remembering this is a particular program that is without precedent across the country. The repairs and the rebuilding aspect is being closely aligned with public works and our property assessment program. We're looking at a way of getting repairs and making good on properties, particularly in flood-impacted areas, and we're looking at thresholds above one in 100. We're also very mindful of the longer term viability, of what is the best arrangement when it comes to rebuilding and those options around relocation. So it's a very complex grant area. It's a very significant grant area. But it's got to be absolutely targeted and delivered to yield the desired benefit in terms of repair. You don't want to put a whole bunch of repairs in if they go back under water in a matter of weeks. It's a bit like some of the pod program.

**The Hon. ROD ROBERTS:** Further to that, on notice, can you break this down. These are the figures provided by the Minister in a question on notice in the *Notice Paper* to me. As of 20 May, of those 215 payments that had been made, how many were then for the essential household contents grants? Forget about the make good—

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** The very vast majority—there could be a small percentage in there, single digit, that would be in the repairs category—would invariably all be contents and furniture.

**The Hon. ROD ROBERTS:** Now we're drilling down. This is not about make good and all that other stuff that you just got on with.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** With respect, it is. The DRG, that's exactly what it does.

**The Hon. ROD ROBERTS:** It's not really. You just told me that in single figures of that 215 would be make good.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** No. What I said was, that's about what might have been paid at that time. They've got 50 per cent of applications—the last figures I saw—that are seeking support with structural repairs. Of the 2½ thousand, there's about 50 per cent that are looking for structural repairs. But there will also be a percentage of those that need structural repairs and contents, which are home owners. There are others that may need looking at that are contents and furnishings alone.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** We've heard just so much evidence from so many people about the failure of the grants program for them, that they've tried to seek money from tradies, who have had to go back to Service NSW six or seven times with documentation. They have even been told by Service NSW, "If you go to the bank now, I assure you that the money is going to be in the bank." Geoff Lynch presented to the public forum in Ballina. He got to the bank and the money was still not there. Twenty-eight days later, I think, his application process closed. That's one example. We've heard heaps more. Maybe it's a question for Mr Fitzsimmons as well as Ms Ellis. Has the Minister directed you to do things differently and to try to open up the grant process more as a result of what is clearly a grant system that's not getting to the people who need it quickly?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** I can say quite categorically that the Government has requested—I don't think there's an off-the-shelf item in terms of disaster relief and funding arrangement that has not been modified or adjusted to see a reduction in evidentiary elements, low doc loans, opening it up and growing the value to people. There's been, absolutely, a push by the Government to see grants being delivered and administered as easily as they possibly can, striking the balance between trying to maintain and prevent, and mitigate fraud and

abuse but targeting and getting the right amounts and the right needs to people that need them the most. As a general answer, the answer is, yes, absolutely the Government and the Minister has.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** Again, hearing the extremely low percentage of applications that have been approved, the extremely low percentage of the amount of money that's been allocated, compared to what the Government grandly announced—hundreds of millions of dollars available for people—in fact, it's tens of millions, if that, that are actually in people's hands for now. What are the tangible changes that have happened to which grants since the floods began?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** I think there's loads of them. If you take the primary producer that we were talking about, the traditional, off-the-shelf package might've been \$15,000 or \$25,000. That's now running at \$75,000. We have now low-doc'd the first up-front payments and we are accelerating those payments with criteria and things to come thereafter. The Government is further seeking support from the Commonwealth to ease that one even more. If we go to the small business, again, the off-the-shelf product, I think, from memory, is around \$15,000 to \$20,000. We're running that at \$50,000.

We've sought interventions particularly for the tradie that you referred to, which is a sole trader. There have been some real challenges with that. They've sought and secured support through the Commonwealth to see the low-doc'ing of loans or the evidentiary obligations to be lowered. To get the balance right they've also focused on the hardest hit or the most highly impacted areas as the ones that will see an easing of restrictions. Remember that if you look at the Northern Rivers, which is seven LGAs, and if you look at the Hawkesbury-Nepean, which might be another half a dozen or so depending on how you calculate it, this disaster event covers 61 local government areas. The intent around trying to ease and provide nuanced and targeted programs is not designed to be a blanket solution; it is designed to target and support those that are most in need. They are examples, and there are loads of examples.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** Thank you for that detail. Sorry to jump in again but I have limited time. Has any thought been given to, for example, the tradie that I referred to—and many people raised this with us—needing to spend the money first to get the grants? It is just extraordinary to have to go out there and spend, say, \$28,000 on a new vehicle. Trying to get a loan in these circumstances is difficult, some of which some people can't get. Has any thought been given to what is such an incredible impediment on flood victims, small business owners and primary producers? We met with cane farmers, for example, who raised that. Is there any thought or direction from above?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** Yes, there has been. I just won't quote which particular grants. For example, the need to spend up-front has been moved from, say, invoices to potentially quotes, estimations or approximations. There are stat dees and low doc loans. The ability to actually demonstrate what is needed and how it is needed has been adjusted.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** That is useful to know.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** It depends on who you are, where you are, what your circumstances are and what grant it is, remembering that there are over 30 separate funding programs here of \$3.5 billion. They are not all opened up. They are targeted for different people.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** I might put some questions on notice about that. In terms of disaster response, what grants were in place and ready to go as the floods were building? What was already in place, ready to go, "Bam, here we go," on 20 February, to pick out a date?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** As has been signalled this morning, if we go to tranche one, things like primary producers, small business, significant spending in anticipation of clean-up and waste removal and those sorts of things. The DRG is a standing provision all year round. We have these arrangements in place with the Commonwealth that have standing provisions for all manner of support and assistance. Depending on the disaster, the State or the jurisdiction has the ability to argue with the Commonwealth about adjustments or variations to those standard packages to increase quantum to create new initiatives to target rental relief, or whatever it is. There are a whole bunch of things that are adjusted and timed. I think you'll find that within a matter of days of the flood occurring the Government made a number of announcements of significant commitments to these programs and promoting their availability for people that are impacted and affected.

**Ms SUE HIGGINSON:** Commissioner Fitzsimmons, given Resilience NSW is the bank and you've been to Lismore and you've no doubt seen and met—in particular I'll focus on Lismore but this could apply in other areas, particularly Wardell and a few others. You've seen resilient Lismore and you've seen the heroes there, including the people who literally left any paid employment or job they would have had. You saw Trees Not Bombs. Same thing—people just set up. Was there any thought of providing any financial assistance to them?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** Yes, there was. I had conversations with some of those people. As was mentioned this morning with our other witness here earlier, the Government recently finalised and announced funding support for those community organisations, which is out and open now, as I understand it, with a view to delivering money from the beginning of July.

**Ms SUE HIGGINSON:** In future events, in terms of Resilience NSW, from the outset will you acknowledge that those amazing things that grow immediately from the community and are led by the community are really worthy projects to support on day one?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** The simple answer is yes, I do support community-led organisations and initiatives. We have arrangements in place to help and support them, but I do not make the determinations for government on the funding packages and the timing of those packages that are announced, distributed and opened up to the likes of community-based organisations. Going forward, there will be arguments for other community-led initiatives to help them with recovery in the medium and longer term and particularly—picking up on our previous witnesses—around the wellbeing of communities as well. We saw similar things with the bushfires and the floods of 12 months ago. Yes, what has been announced now will not necessarily be the last of it.

**The CHAIR:** In the process of the application that our colleague Catherine Cusack presented, was it processed by AI, an algorithm or a human being?

**CATHERINE ELLIS:** All of our applications are processed by humans. There is no automatic processing of any of our flood applications. Customers do complete the application online, or customers who need support, we'll assist them to complete the application, but a human being assesses every single application.

**The CHAIR:** How could a human being reject this: A woman in a boat, with her possessions in two garbage bags, with her two little doggies and her child?

**CATHERINE ELLIS:** I committed previously to looking at the circumstances in this particular case. I do not want to go into individual circumstances in front of the Committee, but I will have a further look at it. We would have assessed it in the same way that we assess all applications, which is by a human.

**The CHAIR:** It was clearly not processed by a human being.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** I want to come back to the small business grants. I apologise to Mr O'Connell. I was looking at the small business grants, not your rural grants, when I started asking you questions before. There was an announcement by the Government of \$434 million for farmers and small business, so that is the \$75,000 grant and the \$50,000 grant. Are you able to give me the figure on how much was for small business?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** For small business, Ms Sharpe, the figure announced was \$229.7 million.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Can I confirm there have been about 18,800—give or take, given that we are working on those edges—applications for that program?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** That correlates with figures that I can see.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** And 52 per cent of those, or almost 10,000, have been deemed ineligible?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** I don't have the exact figures, but it correlates, yes.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** And as of today around 26 per cent, or just under 5,000 people, have been paid. Is that correct?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** Yes, over 5,000 in my books.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Yes, there is a slight difference. Again, we have this situation where people are being deemed ineligible. Leaving aside fraud issues, which are not captured in these figures, can we again get some explanation of why so many people who are obviously in need—because they have applied for the grant—and believe that they should be eligible for support are being knocked back?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** I don't have precise details. I can speculate in the early days that some of them would have been around the sole trader elements, which were particularly challenging for sole traders.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** So sole traders are ineligible for these grants?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** Well, no. It was the threshold elements, and putting some of the low doc and other arrangements in place helped increase the approval rates enormously. I don't know if Catherine has more figures.

**CATHERINE ELLIS:** Just to clarify, you're talking about the \$50,000 small business—

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Correct.

**CATHERINE ELLIS:** Yes. I think, from memory, in round numbers there were in the order of 3,000 sole traders in that group. We had 767 who were non-employing, so essentially the only person who's working in that business is themselves; they don't employ any other people. When the change was made to enable those sole traders to satisfy the requirement to demonstrate that they derived the majority of their income from that business—when the change was made to enable those applicants to satisfy that requirement through completing a statutory declaration—we let all of those customers know that they could complete it that way.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** How did you let them know?

**CATHERINE ELLIS:** We emailed them all.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** I think the other thing that it is important to note is that with the likes of a small business or the likes of the primary producers, whilst the Government attaches a nominal figure to the quantum of the package, it's a demand-driven package and we report back through the Minister to Cabinet periodically on how those programs are tracking. Some of them may end up exceeding what the original forecast was for and some may go under.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** There are none that are exceeding it. I mean, for this one only 30 per cent of the money has gone out the door that was allocated and, as we said before, the other one was 7 per cent.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** Some of them are well under, correct.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** I don't think we are at any risk that you will be going back to ERC for more money any time soon.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** You're not going over budget.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** I accept that the Government allocates funding. Who designs the grants and eligibility criteria? I accept also that there are some requirements from the Commonwealth, but when the Ministers are getting ready to announce these big figures for support for people who want to hear that, who actually designed these grants programs? Who is responsible for that?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** Well, it varies. What I mean by that is the grants programs and packages go across a range of areas. If it's in the primary industries section, for example, we will seek the advice and guidance from RRA and Regional NSW. If it's in the business sector, we have Regional NSW leading business, industry and tourism, so they consult with industry and advise and guide on criteria and methodology. As the State's coordinator for funding and packages, on behalf of the State we broker that dialogue with the Feds and try to seek to get consensus with the Feds on agreeing with criteria. Some they agree with. We work through and adjust that. Some the Feds may not agree with and therefore may not fund, which is then a decision for the State to fund in total.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** So who designed the rental grants?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** The rental support and assistance grants was led through DCJ—our emergency housing and accommodation providers.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** My question goes back to what Ms Cate Faehrmann was talking about, which is about community-led response. Is it your expectation after this time that, given the work that groups like *The Courier Mail* did, that Resilient Lismore did and that Wardell CORE is doing, that your organisation would be able to sign early MOUs with them so that, if it happens again, you can put them in place straightaway? Is that possible under the current system?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** Ma'am, that's one of the objectives of our agency. Historically, there has been a lot of ad-hocery coming into the relief and recovery space and partnerships being formed. One of our remits around the preparatory phase is to look at partnerships and arrangements and MOUs with significant bodies at a State or national level, but more particularly in partnership with local councils and community-led organisations—identifying and capturing those groups. We also seek to engage and sponsor a number of those local organisations to provide ongoing recovery support services throughout communities in the longer term recovery phase. But, yes, the answer is that we are seeking to formulate MOUs at State and local levels to see how we fully utilise and work together to understand what's on offer and how we can best work together as government and non-government organisations.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** It does seem that the Government would like to have one big provider of multiple services in a disaster zone, which does seem to preclude niche funding for organisations like CORE in Wardell. In terms of the architecture and the design of community-level funding and personal grants

programs, have you given any thought to the actual architecture—the Government's architecture, the cracks that things are falling through? You're getting asked lots of questions. You get many media inquiries about this. There must be a better way to get the funds out in a more tailored way to assist people more quickly. How are you tackling that issue?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** Yes, that's right. But what I would say is—for example, if I look at the engagement of recovery support services, I think we've engaged three in the Northern Rivers. We're in discussion with another 14 to provide ongoing services. That might also include some in the Hawkesbury-Nepean, actually. But if you look at the experience and the learning following the bushfires, we did significant community-based funding—the BCRRF, the Bushfire Community Recovery and Resilience Fund. It was effectively soliciting needs, priorities and examples from the community that could then be funded as discrete projects, discrete community-led initiatives—what was deemed local priorities in those areas. They would go to all manner of different organisations because that was what matters most in that area. We're already seeing—

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** I'm so sorry to interrupt you but it's not really answering my question, which is this: Is there a better way that we can do this? If you're just saying, "No, we think we've got it right", then that's the answer.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** No, I think we've got to continue to evolve.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** So my question really is can this be done better and will you consider the governance arrangements?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** Yes, I do. I do think inherently there are some challenges with grant-based programs as well, because often you're capturing those smaller organisations that are grant capable. What we've found historically is we've often got to help a lot of those organisations put a grant together because they're so busy or so light on resources—

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Exactly.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** —they don't have the mindset all the time or the wherewithal to sit down and frame up a grant application that's going to carry. I do agree we've got to work out how to better—

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Can I just ask one more question? Are Commonwealth conditions inhibiting that process of delivering a more fit-for-purpose grants scheme?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** I would say as a general rule we've had very good support with the Commonwealth across the board on tailored and nuanced arrangements with these programs. Don't get me wrong. There are a number of elements throughout the 30-odd different support assistance packages that have been announced where the Feds didn't support or didn't agree, but the Government saw fit that this was a priority and a need and they funded those elements 100 per cent. So the consent of the Commonwealth is fundamentally about seeking co-contributions. Where we don't get that—

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** It's actually the Commonwealth conditions rather than their funding that I'm asking about, because I'm talking about the administration of the grants.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** But it ties together. If we've got Commonwealth co-contribution, the Commonwealth will only co-contribute where they endorse and agree with the criteria. So where they won't—

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** I understand but I'm just asking: Is that making things more complicated?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** That's also under review. The Feds have called for a review on that to look at how to look, going forward, at the—

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** I understand that. All the disaster funding is under review, yes?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** Yes, through the Commonwealth-led—correct.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Ms Ellis, you talked before about the application being an online process. There would obviously be some difficulties for people without houses. Did you have facilities in the recovery centres for people to do that? Did you have people in there to help go through that process with them? If so, who were those people and are they the best people to be doing that? I'm thinking of what we do next time.

**CATHERINE ELLIS:** Thank you for that question. Yes, we have supported, I think, 40 centres around the Northern Rivers or supported Resilience by having Service NSW people in those centres. Any customer who is needing support to complete an application has our support to do that. We also have two mobile service centres—we run mobile service centres in the normal course of events, but we've had one dedicated in the Lismore

area and one in other parts of the Northern Rivers. Our own service centre was flooded, so we needed to re-establish that in amongst it all. We have had people in those centres assisting customers to complete their applications.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Have those people got mental health first aid training?

**CATHERINE ELLIS:** I'd have to come back on specifically the training, but we have supported our people through suicide awareness training and other training in terms of working with trauma-impacted customers.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Thank you. Mr O'Connell, just quickly, as far as pre-populating these forms or these applications, are there other areas we could draw information from that would help expedite the process after an event? I'm thinking specifically through Local Land Services, things like land and stock returns. Are the forms talking to each other to help make things quicker at the end?

**SEAN O'CONNELL:** The short answer is yes, but probably not as effectively as they could. RAA has successfully applied for funding from the Government's Digital Restart Fund to streamline this process, with the goal that a primary producer would only need to tell the Government once, and certainly that is in scope. We actually start that project on 1 July. In scope is to pick up the various data from LLS—stock returns, as you say, or any other relevant data from it.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** Did these same problems arise after the Black Summer bushfires? Was anything learnt after the Black Summer bushfires in terms of how hard it was for primary producers to get grants?

**SEAN O'CONNELL:** It's an excellent question. For the Black Summer bushfire program we offered the \$75,000 Special Disaster Grant, and it became clearly obvious to us—and I'm sure to members of the Committee—that it missed a certain demographic, a certain cohort. On that basis, working with the team from Resilience, we proposed the Rural Landholders Grant, which the commissioner has referred to. The intent of that is to offer a safety net for those who don't otherwise qualify for the Special Disaster Grant. The last thing on that, if I may—when we offered that program for the first time in February last year, the amount was \$10,000. In response to, clearly, the scope and scale of this particular disaster, and feedback that we're having from the community—and certainly from the Government—the maximum amount claimable under that program is \$25,000. So it has increased from \$10,000 to \$25,000.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** Thank you, but I mean specifically in terms of the difficulties that we've heard about—we'll stick just with primary producers—the application process. Were there difficulties post-Black Summer bushfires—or, actually, the floods last year, I think you mentioned—when they came into force, that have been learning experiences to change the way in which they are applied for, to make it easier? Or has that just started now?

**SEAN O'CONNELL:** We're committed to continuous improvements, so every individual program we review that. We talk about quality with Resilience and they in turn talk to their counterparts at the NRRRA. The short answer to your question is yes. I can provide information and specific examples of how that has manifested itself, if that would help. I could do that on notice, Ms Faehrmann.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** Thank you, that would be good.

**Ms SUE HIGGINSON:** Mr O'Connell, just finally, we heard quite a bit of evidence from cane growers—I know it's the case for other croppers. In terms of the losses and the grant, some of the real costs won't come to bear until, perhaps, another couple of years' time, particularly in relation to replanting. There was discussion about potentially requiring a planting subsidy. That is about factoring in the radical increases in the costs of fertiliser and now also contract and machinery labour, given so much machinery has been lost. Is that something that the program is factoring in?

**SEAN O'CONNELL:** To the extent that a primary producer is repairing damage done to his or her crop or his primary production unit, that is something that's in scope. There will be other programs available in the very short period, critical producer grants, which will also assist that betterment concept that you might be referring to.

**Ms SUE HIGGINSON:** Sort of—no, not so much betterment, just the fact that so many of those losses won't be borne by the primary producer for another 18 months to 24 months, in terms of their actual losses and the need to replant a crop that is significantly diminished and is standing now.

**SEAN O'CONNELL:** Thank you for clarifying. Basically, under a Special Disaster Grant, a primary producer has six months in which to claim eligibility. Once approved, they have another six months to present claims invoices. We work closely with the team from Resilience, and if there's merit and if there's an argument for extending that period of claiming, that's certainly something that Resilience would work with the Commonwealth in relation to.

**Ms SUE HIGGINSON:** I think that will become more and more clear as we go through the months.

**The CHAIR:** This question is for Shane Fitzsimmons. Where does Resilience NSW fit into the overall picture if someone wants to lodge an application for assistance? Where do you fit into the puzzle?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** For what sort of assistance?

**The CHAIR:** Rental assistance, or their farm has been destroyed. Where do you fit into that?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** They would be directed and supported through recovery centres, and ultimately landing at Service NSW. Going forward, we want to create, increasingly, a one-stop shop for people needing support and assistance to be able to come in and be able to access those programs and support that they're entitled to.

**The CHAIR:** At the moment, if an 82-year-old single woman who lives in Wardell wants assistance—she does not have the internet, she showers once a week at Wardell CORE and she gets clothing from them—what assistance do you provide her?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** One of the outreach programs—a telephone call, a personal connection phone call. If she doesn't have the internet, they're the sort of people that are supported and assisted through Service NSW, through the access points and the local community hub. We've got people there, as well, as part of that broader network.

**The CHAIR:** Is that your aspiration? Is that what you want to do in the future? Because that's not what's happening now.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** Well, it is what's happening now. It may not be happening to the highest levels of everyone's expectation; I get that. But that is the connection arrangements and the facilitation arrangements that are in place. As we've said, we've grown those grants blitz forums, going into different areas, where people can have an appointment. I think they're an hour and a half?

**CATHERINE ELLIS:** They are 45 minutes.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** There's 45 minutes per appointment to allow people to come in and work through their challenges with whoever is the right person from government, which is why there's a mix of different representatives in that room to further tailor or nuance that support and assistance.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. The time has expired, so we'll resume at 2.45 p.m.

**(The witnesses withdrew.)**

**(Short adjournment)**

**Mr SHANE FITZSIMMONS**, Commissioner, Resilience NSW

**Mr DAVID WITHERDIN**, Chief Executive, Northern Rivers Reconstruction Corporation, affirmed and examined

**Mr MAL LANYON**, Northern NSW Recovery Coordinator, sworn and examined

**Mr BRETT WHITWORTH**, Deputy Secretary, Planning Policy, Department of Environment and Planning, affirmed and examined

**The CHAIR:** Does anyone wish to make an opening statement?

**MAL LANYON:** No, thank you.

**The Hon. ROD ROBERTS:** Mr Lanyon, I would like to get on the public record my personal thanks and congratulations to you on the job that you're doing. I think I speak on behalf of the rest of the Committee.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Hear, hear!

**The Hon. ROD ROBERTS:** In the time that we spent on the North Coast, we heard nothing but praise for your particular role. We heard it from other government agencies, non-government organisations, community groups, individuals and local councils. They all said, to a man—

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Or woman.

**The Hon. ROD ROBERTS:** —"The moment that Lanyon took over, things changed and got better." I just put that on record. I take great comfort in the fact that for some time you have been in charge of that operation. My understanding is you took control on about 8 March. Is that correct?

**MAL LANYON:** That's correct, Mr Roberts. Thank you for the very kind words but, as you know, it has been a significant team effort and I've been surrounded by some excellent people. I love being there.

**The Hon. ROD ROBERTS:** I understand. We are only as good as those that surround us, but somebody has to lead, Mr Lanyon.

**MAL LANYON:** Thank you.

**The Hon. ROD ROBERTS:** Leadership was sadly lacking in the early part and I think that's all been rectified now. You took over from 8 March. Who appointed you to that role?

**MAL LANYON:** Commissioner Fitzsimmons as the Commissioner of Resilience has the ability to appoint me. He appointed me to that role.

**The Hon. ROD ROBERTS:** My understanding is that in terms of the chain of command you answer to Commissioner Fitzsimmons. Is that correct?

**MAL LANYON:** That's correct, sir.

**The Hon. ROD ROBERTS:** Commissioner Fitzsimmons, why did it take until 8 March to appoint Deputy Commissioner Lanyon to the role?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** On 1 March I initially appointed our director of our northern region as the regional recovery controller. It was then several days later, given the magnitude and scale, that I met with the head of the public service and we appointed Mr Lanyon as the regional recovery coordinator for northern New South Wales, particularly given the scale and complexity; the obvious and apparent high profile of the uniformed position and the experience and the skills; and, as it has turned out, the key and the criticality of retaining the EOC arrangements and the local area commanders working with the regional recovery coordinator to see through the significant transition from that relief into recovery phase in the handover from response.

**The Hon. ROD ROBERTS:** The person that you appointed originally, would that be Mr Gary McKinnon?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** Correct.

**The Hon. ROD ROBERTS:** Why wasn't Mr Lanyon appointed from the get-go, bearing in mind you've told us all day today that this flood's unprecedented.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** Correct.

**The Hon. ROD ROBERTS:** We all knew the level of the flood and the disaster that was going to unfold. Why did we wait seven days?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** A regional recovery coordinator was in place. It's in keeping with the new State Recovery Plan that was endorsed at the end of last year. That's the whole idea of having a regional presence. But then within days—and remembering that the appointment of Mr McKinnon was the day after the significant impact—we were readying up for recovery. Then the decision was taken, in my view sensibly, to appoint a different recovery coordinator in Deputy Commissioner Mal Lanyon in recognition of the scale and magnitude of the recovery event that was going to play out. As it turned out—unlike other recovery coordinator appointments—given the scale and complexity, in consultation with Mr Lanyon we set up a differing recovery coordinator structure in the north with two primary branches, being Mr McKinnon leading and coordinating the recovery elements, and Superintendent Tanner heading up the operational coordination tasking elements that were critical in that overlap period.

**The Hon. ROD ROBERTS:** From where I sit, Resilience NSW is the body that has ultimate responsibility for disaster recovery. Am I correct?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** It's in the statute, yes.

**The Hon. ROD ROBERTS:** I am correct so far. Mr McKinnon was the lead man in your organisation. Is that correct?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** He's one of our directors on the North Coast of New South Wales.

**The Hon. ROD ROBERTS:** But to start with, you appointed him to the role of coordinator of the North Coast floods?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** As the regional recovery coordinator, yes.

**The Hon. ROD ROBERTS:** I quote to you from *The Daily Telegraph*, the font of all knowledge, which sometimes I'm concerned about, but anyway. It reads:

Mr Lanyon replaced Gary McKinnon from Resilience NSW as northern NSW flood recovery co-ordinator on Tuesday after the Premier felt the role needed a more senior person in charge.

Could you comment on that for us?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** The conversation I had was with the Secretary of Premier and Cabinet, who relayed to me that the conversations with the Premier and the Deputy Premier were such that they would appreciate Mal Lanyon being appointed. I absolutely agreed with that—

**The Hon. ROD ROBERTS:** As we all do.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** —because of the criticality and the background of a uniformed officer. We did have to manage the move from being the SEOCON to the regional recovery coordinator, but that was readily affected.

**The Hon. ROD ROBERTS:** I'll put a proposition to you and you can either accept it or you can reject it. Resilience NSW and the leadership for the first seven days under the guidance of Mr McKinnon—I don't know Mr McKinnon from a bar of soap, so I'm not critical of him as an individual—was clearly lacking and insufficient to the extent that the Premier said, "Listen, this has to change. We have to put someone more senior and more capable in charge, which we have got, fortunately." I put the proposition to you that Resilience NSW is not fit for purpose when it comes to leading a recovery operation on the ground.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** I reject your proposition.

**The Hon. ROD ROBERTS:** You're entitled to do that.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** I think I've explained sensibly why it was a good idea to make the adjustment. We didn't do that in the other areas. It was reflective of the extraordinary magnitude and scale, remembering that the first seven days was really about framing up and anticipating what the recovery elements would be. We talk about recovery commencing parallel with response and relief arrangements. I think it was a few days before you landed up north anyway, wasn't it, Mal, in those early stages? So we did the appointment and then it was—

**MAL LANYON:** The next day, the ninth.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** Sorry, it was the ninth. Then he took up office thereafter. So, no, I don't support the proposition at all. I think it was a considered and meaningful decision.

**The Hon. ROD ROBERTS:** We'll draw our own conclusions and we will reflect on the Premier's statement.

**The Hon. MARK BANASIAK:** I direct my questions to you, Mr Witherdin. You're now CEO of the Northern Rivers Reconstruction Corporation. How many staff do you have within that corporation?

**DAVID WITHERDIN:** The corporation doesn't formally kick off until 1 July, consistent with the Premier's announcement on 19 April. We anticipate that at full function we'll have somewhere between 30 and 35 staff. Currently, I'm working with a group of my staff out of the public works area, where we've set up what's called the Infrastructure Coordination Office there. There's about half a dozen staff working on that. We've had advertisements out, a couple of weeks ago, for the two key executive director roles.

**The Hon. MARK BANASIAK:** Yes, I've seen that.

**DAVID WITHERDIN:** The first one of those closed Monday and we're working through that. We're also working on the opportunity for internal staff transfers from within the region and we'll certainly be in a position there, ready to go, on 1 July.

**The Hon. MARK BANASIAK:** In the press release the Deputy Premier, Mr Toole, says that you'll have "broad and extensive powers to consult with the community". What specific extensive powers have been bestowed upon you that you didn't already have as a fairly senior public servant?

**DAVID WITHERDIN:** The powers he's referring to there are under the growth centres Act. The Northern Rivers Reconstruction Corporation set up with that as its basis—the Growth Centres (Development Corporations) Act 1974. It is a development corporation. It provides, then, the opportunity for the corporation to both acquire and develop land, as a part of that.

**The Hon. MARK BANASIAK:** Okay, but that's not some magical power to consult. Every public servant has the power to consult with people—you go out and you talk. The Deputy Premier is talking about you having some special power to consult. The land acquisition is a separate thing. Do you have anything specific—whether it's resources or powers—that allows you to consult better than you did in your previous roles?

**DAVID WITHERDIN:** Yes. The corporation is set up with a specific intent there for the seven LGAs in the Northern Rivers—from Clarence in the south, up to Tweed, out to Kyogle and Richmond Valley—

**The Hon. MARK BANASIAK:** I get all that. I only have a limited amount of time. What special powers or resources have you been given to consult better than has been previously done in other agencies?

**DAVID WITHERDIN:** The Government has charged the corporation with leading its reconstruction response there. So for the community there you've got a single point of contact there to deal with everything in terms of that reconstruction effort, including housing. We'll be the key conduit there, with the community, in terms of driving that reconstruction. I think that's the real gamechanger there, in terms of that, and we'll be implementing a number of what I expect will be those key recommendations coming out of the Independent Flood Inquiry.

**The Hon. MARK BANASIAK:** In the media release it says that you'll have the power "to compulsorily acquire or subdivide land". Will you give any guarantee that those compulsory acquisitions will be done at pre-disaster level and not at what the value of the property is now? And will those valuations be done by the Northern Rivers Reconstruction Corporation or by Department of Planning and Environment staff, who normally do the valuations? Who is doing the valuation and will—

**Ms SUE HIGGINSON:** Would market valuers do it?

**The Hon. MARK BANASIAK:** No, DPI—

**Ms SUE HIGGINSON:** DPI don't do it.

**The CHAIR:** It is not your time.

**The Hon. MARK BANASIAK:** Who will be doing the valuations and will you guarantee that they'll be done at pre-disaster level and not the level that they're at now?

**DAVID WITHERDIN:** That is still to be worked through. I will certainly take my advice from the advisory board there, which is yet to be set up but will be appointed. So, I think—

**The Hon. MARK BANASIAK:** Have you done any body of work on what a figure would look like in terms of compulsorily acquiring land? Has any body of work been done to calculate that?

**DAVID WITHERDIN:** My understanding is the Independent Flood Inquiry is doing that work and certainly been in ongoing contact with them.

**The Hon. MARK BANASIAK:** But you're not doing any separate work; you're just waiting to see what the magic figure is from the independent inquiry?

**DAVID WITHERDIN:** The magic figure?

**The Hon. MARK BANASIAK:** In terms of what they deem to be the value, or the estimated value, of compulsorily acquiring land in the Northern Rivers.

**DAVID WITHERDIN:** I think I would look at the Queensland Reconstruction Authority as an example, in terms of the way they've operated. They've never had a compulsory acquisition process; it has always been a voluntary program. My expectation would be that we would run a similar program to the extent that it's voluntary of nature. It's always about giving people the opportunity to opt in to that, not forcing it upon them.

**The Hon. MARK BANASIAK:** Just quickly, how are you interacting with Mr Lanyon in terms of how those roles intersect, given that he's in charge of recovery and you also obviously have a role to play there?

**DAVID WITHERDIN:** Mr Lanyon and I have had a number of both formal and informal meetings. The last formal meeting was last Thursday, I believe, where we were working through and discussing that transition in terms of some of those responsibilities that will then move to the reconstruction corporation but being very clear that the focus of the NRRC is very much around infrastructure. It's around infrastructure and housing. There are quite a lot of things that will continue to run and continue to be led by Resilience NSW, but we will continue to work closely and in partnership so that anything that does transition would be a very smooth and clear pathway. That will be communicated to the community in advance.

**Ms SUE HIGGINSON:** Mr Whitworth, are you aware that there are currently planning instruments that stopped a number of my friends—I'm from Lismore—from building an attic in their homes when they built their homes over the past 15 years? It prevented them from building an attic, which would have meant they could have stored their belongings in their roof and saved half of their lives—as in, their possessions?

**BRETT WHITWORTH:** Ms Higginson, what you're saying is, if I can put it back to you, that the planning controls in Lismore with the heights that the Lismore local environmental plan would have set out meant that a development couldn't occur above either 8.5 or nine metres—

**Ms SUE HIGGINSON:** Precisely.

**BRETT WHITWORTH:** —which is fairly standard across New South Wales standards. I would say that those standards also can be varied using something called clause 4.6, which I think you're familiar with.

**Ms SUE HIGGINSON:** Yes.

**BRETT WHITWORTH:** So I wouldn't characterise it as being an absolute prohibition.

**Ms SUE HIGGINSON:** This one is more specific. This one actually relates because Lismore had an airport and an aeroplane, which is now pretty redundant.

**BRETT WHITWORTH:** So an obstacle limitation—

**Ms SUE HIGGINSON:** An actual obstacle, and it was literally a prohibition. There is a whole locality in Lismore that is incapable of protecting themselves from a flood because of a planning mechanism.

**BRETT WHITWORTH:** I think this is a really good opportunity to say that we need to look at how those planning controls operate, given our understanding of the changing nature of climate events. This is also one of the reasons why we have been through the work that we have done on the flood planning package, which we released last year, encouraging councils to look at how you deal with risk in a different way. We've dealt with flood as a hazard. We now need to start talking about flood being a risk and looking at different circumstances for how development controls, strategic planning and infrastructure need to be identified and managed.

**Ms SUE HIGGINSON:** What do you say to my colleagues in Lismore who have lost everything every time your department writes a recommendation to approve another coalmine in New South Wales—that it doesn't matter to them or there is no correlation?

**BRETT WHITWORTH:** That's a really interesting connection.

**The CHAIR:** I don't actually think it's within our terms of reference, but you guys can deal with it.

**Ms SUE HIGGINSON:** It's about response. People are traumatised. I have thousands of friends in Lismore who literally cannot believe that your department is approving coalmines and is responsible for flood response and recovery.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Point of order—

**Ms SUE HIGGINSON:** I'm happy to leave that one.

**Ms SUE HIGGINSON:** I'm happy to leave that one. Mr Witherdin, as you would be aware, there are so many people who will never be comfortable in their homes in North and South Lismore ever again. They are literally hoping that you will be the person who provides them the opportunity to relocate their lives. They can't afford to buy another place. They're just simply not in that category of socio-economic capacity. Some people want to be able to take their beautiful little old timber homes and put them somewhere up on the hill. Some people's homes are completely ruined, but they don't want to leave the community they love. Is that something that you are going to embrace early and take on as part of the corporation?

**DAVID WITHERDIN:** Yes. You raise some really important points there around people's connection to the land they live on, to the community. In terms of all the decisions we make, we really have to understand and respect that. In terms of what will be on the table, I certainly don't want to prejudge what the recommendations of the independent inquiry will be, but if you look at similar programs like the Resilient Homes Fund that the Queensland Reconstruction Authority has put forward, it is all things from voluntary purchase. Certainly land swaps are things they have done in the past. Grantham is an example of that in terms of retaining people in that community. Where we can enable that, we'd need to be open to that. House raising may be an opportunity and building back in a more resilient way with flood-hardened materials, so where the structure is fine. Also we should be open-minded to the possibility of house relocation as well. Certainly my mind is open to all of those opportunities. I'm really keen to work through what those early recommendations of the inquiry are.

**Ms SUE HIGGINSON:** Just to be clear, are you going to wait for the recommendations? You set up on 1 July. For people who are literally waiting to knock on your door, is there an opportunity for them to knock on your door on 1 July?

**DAVID WITHERDIN:** We'll absolutely have a shopfront there open on 1 July. But I think there will be most value from us then running community sessions there to engage with the community once we've had the government's response to the flood inquiry. So we can go out there and say, "This is what it means for the community", whether it's in Lismore, Woodburn or whatever. Then we can follow up more individually thereafter in terms of what it means for individual people, based on where they're located within the catchment. I appreciate there's a real need there for people to have an early line of sight as to what's on the table and where those key milestones are in terms of decision points. Every day that you have to wait in that situation is a day too long. I'm absolutely conscious of that. We'll work as expeditiously as possible to really lock that in.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Mr Witherdin, you officially kick off on 1 July. Are you and your staff working now?

**DAVID WITHERDIN:** Yes, absolutely. Since the announcement on 19 April, I can say the days have been very long and the weeks are going quickly. Yes, absolutely flat out; there's no doubt about that. We've used that capability we've got there within Public Works. We were out there on the ground in terms of that clean-up, with both Public Works and the Soil Conservation Service. Within about 24 hours we mobilised with that. There are still small pieces of that going on. We've been working with local government in terms of infrastructure recovery, in terms of water and sewer, and working with all of the government delivery agencies. We've been undertaking procurement there for the temporary accommodation, the site set-up for that. Also, we're administering the Flood Property Assessment Program, where residents can opt in to get a structural assessment done of their property and a scope of work as to what's required to repair that. If it's not structurally sound, they can opt in to get that demolished as well.

We're certainly moving on a whole number of fronts. That infrastructure coordination office I mentioned in the answer to the first question, the people working in that will lock in as part of the NRRRC. Really, the importance of that role is that we've got a single viewpoint right across all of the New South Wales Government delivery agencies and across those seven LGAs, so we can prioritise those reconstruction projects so that we don't have government agencies competing against each other. What we know, even before the floods, it was a very tight sort of construction and contractor pool. So we can do those things that are most important first and we can direct that, and similarly with the seven local government authorities. Also, it's really important that we can maximise the local content there so we can give the economic opportunity to local contractors, local trades. The further benefit of that is we know it's already a very tight market in terms of accommodation, so trying to bring labour into that space, there is just nowhere for them to stay.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Are we confident, as a new agency, that there are no gaps, particularly between your corporation and Planning, that there are no gaps that people are going to slip through?

**DAVID WITHERDIN:** I won't say there's 100 per cent confidence—certainly from my point of view—and absolute best endeavours to ensure that's not the case. I've been working closely with Mr Lanyon,

Mr Fitzsimmons and his team, and Mr Whitworth. We have regular, formal engagement with Resilience NSW. I've been up there with one of Mr Fitzsimmons' key staff, travelling around last Thursday, Friday. I'll be up there on ground again tomorrow. We're as joined at the hip as you can be in terms of that.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** I think it's great that you're all getting on so well. I've got it.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Mr Lanyon, what were you able to do? You've received a lot of high praise. What things do you think you were able to do to warrant that praise that maybe wasn't being done before?

**MAL LANYON:** Probably to give leadership to the operational focus. One of the things that needs to happen in recovery, in my view, from the first moment is really an operational tempo. There's a number of things in that community there. Obviously, I was honoured to be appointed. One of the first things I saw when I drove into Lismore on the ninth was the heartbreaking scenes of the amount of possessions, the amount of furniture, the amount of whitegoods that was out the front, on the streets in Lismore. As we had a flyover a number of some of smaller communities—Woodburn and Coraki—there was a real need to make things happen and give the community hope.

So probably the first thing I did was to appoint what I'll call an operational coordination—a fantastic commander in Superintendent Scott Tanner—to coordinate the resources, to start making things happen quicker. That was really my focus, to start making progress. The best way I know to do that is to pull all of the organisations together—be they functional areas, be they emergency service organisations—getting them to work together and tasking them centrally so that we can actually work through things. I know people have spoken about the clean-up before. I can tell you that in several weeks we moved between 120,000 and what I now believe is 150,000 tonnes of material. I don't call it waste because there was a lot of very special possessions amongst that material that went there. But that is a significant body of work. That doesn't happen without coordination between PWA, the EPA, council. To be honest, the ADF were absolutely fantastic at that stage in the clean-up. They assisted greatly.

My role really was to bring some structure and to bring a real operational focus and operational tempo. I saw that as the most important thing. The second thing was really just to listen to the community, work with the community and fix problems. Being a police officer, something that is an innate thing with me is that I like to solve problems for the community. Really, it was the opportunity and it was my responsibility to listen. So I went to a number of community meetings to listen to what wasn't working; how do we make an improvement. Then go out and just speak to normal people around the streets to see what was going well and what wasn't, and try to make an improvement on those. They were probably the key areas that I had when I first got there.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Mr Whitworth, can I ask you about rain gauges in the catchment? You are probably aware that the Mayor of Lismore gave as evidence that the department of planning declined an application for funding to improve that early warning system. We have also heard evidence this morning from BOM, saying that the assets are owned jointly, I think, or managed jointly. I just wondered if there is some thought given to how we can improve—

**BRETT WHITWORTH:** Sorry, Ms Cusack, I'm from the planning part of the Department of Planning and Environment. That question about the water gauges, I am assuming, is one for the water group of the Department of Planning and Environment. I can take it on notice, but I can't answer that question.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Thank you. The mayor said it was the department of planning that declined the grant. It has all become a bit tricky for everyone. I accept what you are saying.

**BRETT WHITWORTH:** The Department of Planning and Environment is 11,000 people and we do multiple functions.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Do you have an interest in the rain gauges and the early warning systems in the catchment?

**BRETT WHITWORTH:** From a planning sense, in terms of how you can help build greater resilience into the strategic planning and then the statutory planning controls, yes. Do I have that within my purview? No.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** What about drains?

**BRETT WHITWORTH:** Again, I'm here representing the planning elements of the department of planning. Again, some of these things are quite challenging in terms of who has that within their responsibility because, in some cases, its council.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** You might be the only agency that is not responsible for drains because it seems like everyone else has kind of—

**BRETT WHITWORTH:** Again, I'm sorry, I cannot answer questions on areas that I don't have within my responsibility.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** What about flood mitigation assets?

**BRETT WHITWORTH:** Again, sorry, that's the Environment and Heritage group. Sorry, I apologise.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Can you tell me your particular interest in being here?

**BRETT WHITWORTH:** Other than being requested? I am chairing the housing recovery task force, working with Resilience NSW and Mr Lanyon. We have been responsible for the identification and update of the planning controls to enable the temporary villages.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Okay, got you. I will direct this question to you. Is there an actual time line with milestones for completing that planning process?

**BRETT WHITWORTH:** The planning process for the villages?

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Yes, and then also for completing the project in its entirety.

**BRETT WHITWORTH:** I will deal with the first one. We have identified at least 20 sites and we have used the planning system to ensure that we can get an expedited process. We have identified 20 sites working with councils using predominantly Crown land or council land. Of those 20 sites, we have construction activity occurring on at least four of them and detailed design for a further nine.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** I apologise for interrupting. Do you have a time line for the completion of these different stages?

**BRETT WHITWORTH:** That is a challenge because the time line depends on the production of the pods and the delivery of the pods to the site. Those time lines keep changing. If you said, "Do you have a definitive time line at the moment?" they keep changing because we are trying to get acceleration out of the manufacturers.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Do you have an estimated completion date for that rollout? At the moment, realising that might change, what is your best estimate?

**BRETT WHITWORTH:** I'd really like to take that on notice because it does change from day to day. We obviously have pods and people in pods now, and it will be a progressive rollout over progressive sites. You are looking for an end—

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** I understand. Will it be completed this year? Is that possible?

**BRETT WHITWORTH:** There is every hope that we can finish that this year. I think we will also continually look at whether there are other options as they come up for housing people both in the short term and long term. The number of people that are requesting a pod is continually changing and shifting. As Mr Witherdin talked about, as we get into working with people around the condition of their houses, we will look at whether we can work with them to get them back into their houses quicker.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** I understand it changes. Mr Witherdin, do you know how many people you are helping, who they are and where they are at the moment? Do you have that information available? I am not asking for it; I am just asking if you have that information.

**DAVID WITHERDIN:** The best information we have at the moment is that which we captured through the Flood Property Assessment Program that I mentioned earlier. In terms of registrations for that, we have had about 4,000 people register for that assessment. We have all of their details and I think about a thousand of those assessments have been conducted so far.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Are they all property owners?

**DAVID WITHERDIN:** They will be property owners, yes.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** In relation to renters and other people who were displaced, that is not really your bailiwick. Am I correct in that understanding?

**DAVID WITHERDIN:** That is correct, yes.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Do you have a feeling for how many investment properties are involved?

**DAVID WITHERDIN:** I don't have a feeling for that, no, nor any detail. I am happy to take it on notice to see if we have something, but I am certainly not aware of it.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** I am interested in whether the assistance is different for a home owner versus a property investor, recognising that both forms of accommodation are needed in the Northern Rivers. I am absolutely not suggesting that one is better than the other.

**DAVID WITHERDIN:** Yes.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Thank you for taking that on notice. Are you conscious that there are certain forms of assistance that are being given now that are forcing people to rebuild in flood zones when they don't wish to? For example, insurance companies want to rebuild rather than give people a cash payout. So they have to rebuild in a flood zone and then they are told they cannot get their home insured again. The grants that the New South Wales Government is giving, which requires people to do the work and then claim back on the actual work that is being done, all seem to be eroding people's freedom to leave the flood zone even if they wish to.

**DAVID WITHERDIN:** I have certainly had engagement there with a number of insurers through the Insurance Council of Australia and also the Australian Banking Association because I think it is really important to understand what their concerns are and certainly what datasets they have available—models and so on. They have a real depth of information there. But certainly in terms of discussions I have had with the Insurance Council, they absolutely have a strong view in terms of trying to get people out of harm's way to really mitigate that risk. That has very clearly come through.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** I know, but it is at odds with how they administer the policies. The way they are doing this seems very different to what they say they want.

**DAVID WITHERDIN:** I haven't had firsthand experience of it from a policyholder's point of view but would be really keen to look at any specific instances as case studies there—

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** I think that change in policy would help.

**DAVID WITHERDIN:** —because the insurance industry is a really key stakeholder in the decisions we make in terms of building back better right across the whole Northern Rivers community. The ability of people to actually get insurance—you know, without that you can't get finance. I think we all understand that.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** I am really delighted to hear that you have been talking to the Banking Association. Does that mean that you may have information about how many mortgages are held over properties that have been impacted?

**DAVID WITHERDIN:** I don't have access to that information at this stage. I haven't sought it at this stage.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** What sort of information have they given you in terms of in-depth information?

**DAVID WITHERDIN:** We haven't got in-depth information from either the insurance industry or the Banking Association but, certainly in terms of the insurance industry, they have shared with us the level of detail that is available through them. When we get to the point of modelling for future land use planning and so on—and the models we develop as part of that, which is the work that you are probably aware CSIRO is doing—it is really important that that can interface with some of what industry has there as well, and there is agreement around that.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** I appreciate that. I'm just really eager, and I'm sure that you are, too, to understand the demographics of the people that you're going to be trying to assist. For example, there are home owners there with big mortgages. Their homes have been destroyed but they're still paying the mortgages. The banks have offered zero assistance and they're living in these ruined homes, and winter is coming—

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Winter is here.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** —which I wanted to ask Mr Lanyon about. Are we going to do something to help these people who've moved back into tents?

**MAL LANYON:** We are, ma'am. We're very much asking for people who are in that situation and where we know that to reach out and we'll provide assistance. I did hear some answers from earlier evidence this morning about emergency accommodation. I know people are moving back into tents because they wish to move back into their homes and get some work done. I think to start with the key message needs to be that where people do need accommodation and coming into these colder months, I'd ask them to put their hands up. We will accommodate people in emergency accommodation where possible, if that's the best solution we've got. A tent, to me, is not a great solution for people up there at the moment.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Not in Lismore.

**MAL LANYON:** We just need to know about it. So it's about trying to move people back into their homes with a suitable level of repair so that they can get there—I think that's what Mr Witherdin's been saying—or looking at alternative accommodation so that we can get people with a roof over their heads. But I need people to put their hands up. That has been one of the messages, certainly through the media that I've done over the past months. It's really saying, "We need to actually know who you are and what you need there." There was a good question before. There are still a lot of unknowns at the moment. We know people are living rough and sharing with family, and we need to try to get the best picture we can. But we also need people to understand that if they need assistance, we will provide it to them.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** I'm disappointed that the flood occurred on 28 February and, to be perfectly honest, you gentlemen don't really have the information that you need in terms of who these people are. There's doorknocking going on now. I just feel that caravans and motorhomes on those sites would be infinitely—would be just such a better option than people living in freezing homes that have black mould. I would just like some reassurance that an effort is being made, as we're now in June, to identify and assist those people.

**MAL LANYON:** I can say that we are working through a range of options. As of today, certainly in terms of the community of Woodburn, which will not be getting a pod village because there's not a suitable location because it is flood-prone, we will be running a caravan program to actually get people back towards their homes so that we can actually support the small business there. There is a range of options being explored, obviously, in terms of where we can put caravans, how we prioritise people, and how we do—certainly, in the rural committees that's an excellent way to get primary producers to be able to stay at home and look after their animals and look after their properties.

We are trying to escalate that as quickly as possible but, as you can imagine, with the scope of this, the priority had to be on pod villages so we could accommodate as many people as possible. We are now trying to push forward a range of alternatives to get people into suitable accommodation where we haven't got them in emergency accommodation. As I said before, everyone who needs emergency accommodation needs but ask and we'll get them into it. I accept that's not the preferred accommodation.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** It's not that. It's just that they're not asking and they're not aware of it and the doorknocking that Resilience is doing is showing that at least one-quarter to one-third of people are not even aware of options available.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Witherdin, I understand that the reconstruction corporation commences officially on 1 July.

**DAVID WITHERDIN:** That's correct, yes.

**The CHAIR:** I understand it was constituted under the growth strategies.

**DAVID WITHERDIN:** The growth centres Act, yes.

**The CHAIR:** What is the sunset clause of your organisation or body? When does it come to an end?

**DAVID WITHERDIN:** Look, the expectation is three to five years, and let's hope it's sort of at the lesser end of that. I think it's unlikely it will be any shorter than three years.

**The CHAIR:** Which Minister do you answer to?

**DAVID WITHERDIN:** The Deputy Premier.

**The CHAIR:** In relation to Shane Fitzsimmons, where do you fit in relation to Resilience NSW?

**DAVID WITHERDIN:** I think, certainly for me, the remit of Resilience NSW is clear, as is ours in the NRRC. I think, you know, the role that we've got is far beyond what was ever envisaged for Resilience and requires a different set of skills and capability. What we are focused on is about rebuilding and reconstructing infrastructure there and the housing as well to support that. This isn't just in the short term in terms of weeks and months; this is in terms of years. Clearly, Mr Fitzsimmons locks in under the emergency services Minister. My reporting line is to the Deputy Premier. Certainly, I have regular conversations both with Mr Fitzsimmons and also with his Minister as well. I think having that ongoing conduit of information and feedback between both will be really critical in the way forward.

**The CHAIR:** You mentioned infrastructure just now. The mayor of Lismore, Steve Krieg, told us that they would need \$250 million for road repairs. The Tweed mayor, Chris Cherry, said that there's around \$800 million—and that doesn't include potholes. What assessment has been done on the cost of infrastructure on the North Coast?

**DAVID WITHERDIN:** Each of the line agencies have taken their lead with that. So in terms of Transport for NSW, Mr Fuller, who's here this afternoon, will be the best one to answer that. Similarly, for education, for health—there's been a package for water and sewer being developed there with each of the LGAs as well. They're all a matter of public record—what's been put forward in terms of the initial funding for those. It's not just a build back; in many instances it is a build back better. That will then be fleshed out further.

**The CHAIR:** Okay. But you must have an idea of what will be the cost to repair the infrastructure on the North Coast. You have roads, schools, bridges. If you're part of the reconstruction corporation—

**DAVID WITHERDIN:** Yes. We have a coordinating role sitting over that, and I'll take the detail of that on notice in terms of aggregating all of that—

**The CHAIR:** You're not doing work in that area now? You must have a ballpark figure. The Insurance Council came out and said that this was the fourth most costly natural disaster in Australia.

**DAVID WITHERDIN:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** They've had 92,000 claims, so you must have an indication of what is the cost of the project, the task ahead of you.

**DAVID WITHERDIN:** The cost—so far all the funding that has been put forward both by State and Commonwealth governments is in the order of about \$3½ billion committed already. That's not just specific to the Northern Rivers but from this flood event. The insurance industry have indicated already \$4.3 billion. That's not closed yet. We know also that, in terms of Lismore, probably one of the most under- and uninsured communities in the country as well—

**The CHAIR:** There's a difference between saying \$3.5 billion or \$4.3 billion. What is the estimated cost to repair the region?

**DAVID WITHERDIN:** The estimated cost in terms of—

**The CHAIR:** To restore infrastructure, schools—we went to a school in Tumbulgum. We saw roads. We saw landslips. We spoke to mayors. Mayors ran through and gave us an indication. As I said earlier, \$250 million for roads in Lismore and \$80 million for roads in the Tweed—the Byron mayor gave us similar figures. In fact, they were massively beyond what they spend each year on roads. I'm trying to get an indication. You're the reconstruction commission. You're the rebuilding commission. You must have an indication of the cost that is before us.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** Chair, if I may, I can help in this regard. Through the State Recovery Committee, we do get reports and updates from the infrastructure subcommittee and we also get it through the Transport task force. The infrastructure subcommittee is signalling in the figure of at least \$1.7 billion worth of infrastructure. When it comes to roads, the State road impact is about 3,000 kilometres—\$250 million cost to the State road network and about \$1.3 billion to the local government road network. They're some of the indications coming through. But as Mr Witherdin gets into his seat—into the role—we've also set up the ICO, the Infrastructure Coordination Office. It'll be co-located there as well.

**The CHAIR:** But you're saying getting into his seat. He's already out there giving speeches to infrastructure summits. You're clearly in the position now, even though July 1 is a legislative kick-off. You're out there. I'm just trying to get an indication of how much it's going to cost, what you're going to do, what direction you're going to set?

**DAVID WITHERDIN:** Yes, and I think I've said that pretty clearly. I've outlined the role of the Infrastructure Coordination Office and, most importantly, how we're prioritising that and what the value of that function is. Then in terms of the second—and some of the most important work, that'll come out of the flood inquiry. Mr Fitzsimmons has run you through, overall, about \$1.7 billion. I'm very happy to take it on notice and come back, detail by detail, with every step of the program.

**The CHAIR:** Take it on notice. I have one last question. Mr Lanyon, I want to associate myself with the comments made by Rod Roberts. When we were up there, we actually had people say to us, "Nothing happened until Mal Lanyon was appointed." What? Why? Why and what and how? What background, what experience, what skill set that didn't, obviously, occur previously, occurred? What was the approach? Why did it occur? They said tonnes of garbage was removed, whitegoods were removed, streets were cleaned up, things were fixed. What was the light switch? What made the difference? What was the approach that you took?

**MAL LANYON:** Thank you, Mr Secord. That is very humbling, and it's probably misplaced a lot. I come from a fairly significant background in policing and policing leadership, and that's really about getting people to actually work with you to get things done. As I said, when I first got there, one of the things that I thought

could be enhanced was some real operational focus and coordination—really getting agencies in the same place and working on a set of priorities, to be honest. When you walk into a scene like the Northern Rivers region, the magnitude of the damage is quite incredible. It's not possible to do everything at once. It was trying to isolate what the priorities needed to be, and it's about giving the community some hope. The clean-up—

**The CHAIR:** Did you have a big bureaucracy behind you? Did you have a huge bureaucracy behind you? What was your team?

**MAL LANYON:** I had a significant number of operational resources available that needed to be properly coordinated. We didn't have a large command team, to be honest with you. I think, as Commissioner Fitzsimmons said before, I basically had two deputy coordinators—so a Resilience one, and Superintendent Scott Tanner. We had a fairly lean team under that. But we had a lot of resources available through emergency services agencies, the ADF. We had a lot of people to do the work, it just needed to be coordinated—but prioritised as well. Obviously the clean-up was one of the most significant things we could make progress on, because it gave the community hope that we were moving forward. Restoring services and utilities was a really key one—restoring access to properties. It was just prioritising, I suppose.

**The CHAIR:** The clean-up and restoring utilities were the two things that they pointed to first.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** I'm not quite sure who to direct this to, so apologies. There are people who are currently in caravans. I assume some of them are privately provided and some are provided by the Government through our temporary emergency arrangements. Is the funding for those reliant on the people having received the rental support program funding? Can anyone answer that for me?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** I think that's a difficult question to answer, in the way that it has been asked. I mean that respectfully, so—

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** No, that's fine.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** We have got the pod villages, and then we've also got attached to that some caravans that are helping with that accommodation. You might recall, we talked about motorhomes that were also being provided as well, or the campervan motorhome things—120-odd of those. They are being used. As to people securing caravans privately, that would be subject to the individual circumstances. But, as we signalled earlier today, and Mr Lanyon reinforced, we're also exploring, particularly with Richmond Valley Council, the program to go forward and starting to get people to register interest in accessing a caravan, in lieu of a pod, to put on their property—particularly in places like Woodburn, where it's in a flood zone and you want the ability to move those assets, because a lot of houses down there are elevated, for example. So I don't know how to answer that question specifically, if you understand where I'm coming from.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** If people are in a caravan or a mobile home, are they paying rent?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** If we are providing it, it's no different to the pod village or the campervan. It's accommodation being provided by Government, which is what the \$350 million package equates to.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Okay, so they're not paying any rent?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** No, not that I understand.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Thank you, it was just unclear to me what the situation was. Mr Lanyon, or maybe Mr Fitzsimmons, how long are you in the position that you're in for?

**MAL LANYON:** That's an excellent question, Ms Sharpe. I haven't been given a date when I'll transition back out there. I've got no doubt there will be a natural transition at some stage. I think, as Mr Witherdin has highlighted, his focus is very much on infrastructure. Part of my role is very much on the humanities side of things at the moment. I've set up a senior steer co to actually focus on mental health and wellbeing, and pulled together a lot of providers—be it the health networks, the LHD or the NGOs—so that we have a local mechanism there to do that. I'm actually running a round table tomorrow with Minister Cooke and the mental health providers to look at resourcing and how we take that forward. Part of my role at the moment is to make sure there is a real focus on the humanities, as I call it. But there will be a need for that to continue, and obviously Resilience and that work will continue. But I can say to you I don't have a final date at the moment, and I'm sure I'll be told at the appropriate time. I'm very comfortable that we're still working at the moment.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Sure. I don't mean for this to be awkward, but it's quite important: Mr Fitzsimmons, how long? Is it three months? Is it six months? Is it 12 months?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** I think Mal has summarised that very well.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Well, he didn't answer the question.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** Like we did in the Hunter, the Central Coast and the Greater Sydney region, the recovery coordinators for those regions have maintained their presence, but the role tends to shift and change as progress occurs. In those other areas recovery centres and access points have closed down, back to local arrangements. There's still a lot of activity up north, so I suspect Mal will be there for some time yet. We will work with Mal and the Minister around what that tenure looks like going forward, particularly as we see the recovery corporation come on board and transition to that next phase.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** You still didn't quite answer the question, but that's alright. I'm glad that you raised the issue around mental health. You'd be seeing every day that people are in a state of trauma that is quite pronounced. I think it's going to get worse before it gets better, to be honest. There seem to have been some issues in terms of the flexibility of grants being able to support that kind of local, community-led effort. The example that I used earlier today was Wardell CORE. They've actually got someone who has extensive experience in disaster recovery, internationally and here, who has been working pro bono for all this time. He's clearly built a very strong relationship with the local community there, but it seems to us that there's an inability to work through the various grants. We keep getting told there's a grant for this or there's a grant for that or there's a program for that. How can that be better taken up in trying to find that flexibility at that really local level, on an issue that we know is actually working?

**MAL LANYON:** Yes, I think that's correct, Ms Sharpe. I think the most important part of the recovery is the community supporting the community, and then the State assists the community to go forward. Part of that senior stakeholder committee was to make sure that we had all of the representatives so that I could understand—because obviously that's not my background up in the Northern Rivers—where there may have been resource implications and how we best support community to support community. To be honest, that's one of the key focuses of the mental health round table tomorrow with Minister Cooke. Some of those agencies I have no doubt will advocate for what their needs are to go forward, and it gives them a vehicle to do that. There is a grants program, and tomorrow is probably about trying to understand, as much as anything, with some of those groups exactly what it is they need to access those grants—because I couldn't agree more with you.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** I think this is to Mr Witherdin. I wanted to ask about workforce planning, another wicked problem in the recovery effort. I am just wondering what you anticipate and what you're going to be able to do to bring resources across government. So much work needs to be done. Leaving aside whether people stay in their homes or not, for those that are staying, there's just not the workers to be able to do it. Can you just give us a bit of an idea about what you're doing with workforce planning?

**DAVID WITHERDIN:** Yes. As you're well aware, this was a problem even before the floods and it's certainly been significantly exacerbated by it, particularly because of the impacts in south-east Queensland because you've often got a trades workforce that will move between those areas. What we're doing in that infrastructure coordination role is important in ensuring that we actually prioritise what's done to get that sequentially done in the right order and actually aggregate packages of work. We're even having a preliminary look at the opportunity to bulk purchase what we know are scarce materials in many cases as well. We're doing that, and we've also undertaken a program as part of the Flood Property Assessment program. We've got a head contractor, Johns Lyng, that is running that and we've had a pre-registration process or pre-qualification process where local trades are able to register their availability and we've aggregated that and we've got lists of who's available and a vetting process in place as part of that. That's the key part of work that's in play at the moment.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** I think this next one is to you, Mr Lanyon. That is the trades and all of those things, but we took evidence from some of the academics, the university, on the general lack of mental health workers and social workers. We've already got a problem with aged-care workers. Is there thinking about, again, how to provide the community with the numbers of professionals that they need through this longer period?

**MAL LANYON:** Yes, Ms Sharpe. The round table tomorrow is part of that advocacy with the Minister. Can I say there are a number of challenges that exist up in the region to increase the number of resources. Housing is a primary challenge to getting people to want to move up to the Northern Rivers region. If they can't get cost-effective housing, it makes it very challenging, and I think that is one of the ones. Mental health services are best delivered by local services, and that has been one of the key messages that has come to me. "Please don't get people in here for two months. Even though we could really do with the support, they don't actually understand the area. The community won't relate to them as much." The focus certainly needs to be on looking at that long-term rebuild of resources so they actually become part of the community when they're there, and that's really what that steering committee has been about. The round table tomorrow is to identify those resource deficiencies, perhaps, or things that we can strengthen over a period of time and work through the Minister to make sure that we can take that forward.

**The Hon. ROD ROBERTS:** Mr Lanyon, this may be a difficult question for you to answer, bearing in mind the circumstances in which you appear today, but it's the elephant in the room and it needs to be addressed. My question is further to the question asked by Mr Secord on what you did differently and why things changed, and I jotted down some quick notes: you put a structure in place; operational tempo; you set priorities; and you properly coordinated the response. The question that begs to be asked is, when you took over on 8 March, were those things present or not?

**MAL LANYON:** There was certainly a structure in place, Mr Roberts, and things were happening there. That is when I said before that I don't want it to be seen that I turned up and the world changed.

**The Hon. ROD ROBERTS:** Well, apparently it did because it is uncontested evidence, Mr Lanyon, that the world changed the moment you stepped foot into Lismore.

**MAL LANYON:** I think by, certainly, enabling the separation and to have a real dedicated operational focus, I think sometimes a uniformed service is able to get some of that tempo happening quicker. Services like the army will respond better to tasking for police, and we're very much used to tasking uniformed services. I think that was really what I could bring to it. I think there were structures in place. My role was really to escalate and make things move along a whole lot quicker.

**The Hon. ROD ROBERTS:** Just taking that forward, this is all about a learning experience so we don't make similar mistakes all over again so we can put better processes in place. This is not about a gotcha moment or trying to pin somebody to the wall. We looked back at the bushfire recovery and it was led by one of your former colleagues, Mick Willing. We look at this and you've been appointed by the Premier quite clearly to take leadership of this. Going forward, when we have our next disaster—and we will, there is no doubt we'll have another one—do you think it would be appropriate from the get-go to appoint a senior police officer to be in charge?

**MAL LANYON:** I think there's certainly a precedent for a senior uniformed officer to be in charge to get that to go. If you look at Queensland as a model, they certainly have the QRA but they also have a person performing the same role as I do. He's still a major general but he's out doing that role at the moment. I think it puts a different perspective on it. The functions that are in place are there; it's about how we make sure that we give particularly a short-term drive to make sure that there is a real impetus to recovery. To be honest, the model that you have described works quite well. It does help to have a uniform presence there to drive that. Innately, that's what we do in emergencies, and it certainly supports the functions of Resilience and the functions of all the other agencies.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** Mr Whitworth, where is the independent review of development into flood-prone areas of the State that the Minister announced in March?

**BRETT WHITWORTH:** Is this the Professor O'Kane-Mr Fuller inquiry?

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** No, the one into development—not the floods inquiry generally, the one that the Minister announced into flood-prone areas of the State.

**BRETT WHITWORTH:** Respectfully, I think the Minister was referring to and had knowledge of the Professor O'Kane-Mr Fuller inquiry that was coming. Professor O'Kane led the inquiry into bushfire response. It was something that was clearly part and parcel of the comments that he gave in evidence at estimates that day.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** What's happened with various applications that may be before councils in flood-prone areas? Are they able to be paused while this is underway?

**BRETT WHITWORTH:** The applications—

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** So, Tweed—is there anything that you have been able to do to stop any approvals in flood-prone areas while this review is underway?

**BRETT WHITWORTH:** No, because the existing controls that sit there in relation to the application of the flood-prone land clauses continue to apply, and have always applied. The ability to put a pause on development would effectively mean coming with a State planning policy and prohibiting development.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** Has any consideration been given to that at this time? Clearly we have seen the impact of all this development on flood-prone land, and you know there's going to be much more. Is there any suggestion internally within the department of planning by the Minister, or elsewhere, to do that? Are there any requests?

**BRETT WHITWORTH:** There's a supposition there about internal processes. We have been consistently talking about the importance of seeking advice from Professor O'Kane and Mr Fuller on how we

should be enabling the planning system to respond. I talked earlier today about the fact that, traditionally, planners have looked at flooding being a hazard, and we need to shift that to flooding being a risk. We need to recognise that there are different levels of risk and to tune the planning controls that reflect the risk in those areas. You talked about flood plains. "Flood plain" can mean many different things. Are we talking about development up to the probable maximum flood or are we talking about development at a lower level? Are those lower levels appropriate? The one-in-100-chance-per-year flood, is that the right level of risk to set planning controls at? In some places it may well not be the right level of risk. That's why we've been talking about the Hawkesbury-Nepean and put a pause on rezonings in the Hawkesbury-Nepean Valley, as an example.

**Ms SUE HIGGINSON:** Just on that, I think Lismore is a really good case study for our department of planning to accept that PMFs are the new consideration and we need to be looking at PMFs quite regularly, because looking back at flood levels is perhaps a thing of the past and we need to start looking forward. Are you waiting for Mary O'Kane to tell you that or otherwise?

**BRETT WHITWORTH:** Respectfully, I don't agree that PMF should become the new flood planning level. That would just wipe out large amounts of people's value in their homes in places like western Sydney. I think what we are talking about is understanding how to set planning controls based on risk. I agree with you, Lismore is a really good place to talk about where that level of risk should be identified and how we manage it. My understanding of the first flood event in Lismore is that it was well and truly beyond that one-in-100 chance per year line. Therefore, we need to look at what were the circumstances that led to that, so the causation of that event, and what were the mitigating factors, what were the ways in which we could manage the response to that.

If you contrast that to some of the flooding events that happened in the Hawkesbury-Nepean, they weren't at that extreme level. But, yes, we need to understand and plan for that in a way that addresses human health and safety first and then a minimisation of impact on property second. I think to say that setting the flood planning level to PMF is a pretty blunt instrument that would have quite significant impacts. But changing our concept and saying a flood planning level should be for all and a day the one-in-100 chance per year flood, that's absolutely something that we are anticipating out of the inquiry and, in fact, we have put in place planning controls that can allow that to happen.

**Ms SUE HIGGINSON:** So you think it's going to likely land somewhere between the PMF and a one-in-100 chance per year event?

**BRETT WHITWORTH:** I think it's going to be a risk-based approach that will be appropriate to the location.

**Ms SUE HIGGINSON:** And with the ultimate criteria of saving lives?

**BRETT WHITWORTH:** Yes.

**Ms SUE HIGGINSON:** On probable maximum flood levels, with the reconstruction corporation and with Resilience NSW, through its preparedness and taking that risk and safety of life into the future, if we are looking at reconstructing under an adaptation model now—because I think perhaps we would all agree that we'd be foolish not to—I understand that we are doing some remodelling about the PMF because we're at 16.5 metres, which is only 1.4 if we say the flood was actually 14.6 not 14.4, and so we're only 1.4 off the PMF. Is the reconstruction corporation likely to be taking that PMF as soon as its remodelled and where 16.5 is likely? Is that what you will be working on, in terms of the reconstruction mission?

**DAVID WITHERDIN:** I think we've certainly got to get an understanding of what happened there in terms of the size of this event. I think for Lismore the early indication was that this was an event in the order of about one-in-200 years or an annual exceedance probability of half a per cent, whereas events in 2017, the second event this year, in 1974 and 1954 were probably closer to the one-in-100-year event. Certainly what we know in terms of rainfall is that these events are getting more intense and more frequent and that's the work that CSIRO are doing. They are being commissioned by the NRRRA to do that and what they're developing is like a dynamic model of the Wilsons-Richmond catchment. They'll be flying lidar there to get the detail of the topography, understanding the bathymetry of the river and then be able to really model exactly what's happened there and take all the inputs from this event, as part of that, to build up the best knowledge base going forward.

**Ms SUE HIGGINSON:** Can you confirm that work has started?

**DAVID WITHERDIN:** Yes.

**Ms SUE HIGGINSON:** It has?

**DAVID WITHERDIN:** That work has started. There are two parts to it. I met up with the CSIRO two weeks ago in terms of that. The first bit they're doing is aggregating all of the modelling that has happened to date

across the seven LGAs and across government, making what they term "no regrets" early recommendations. Certainly, this bigger piece of work they indicate is going to take about two years. We'll be doing everything we can to compress that as much as possible, but it will be really critical in terms of going forward. I think the understanding of the PMF—that really becomes important in terms of mitigating hazards in the future, understanding what's possible. I think a lot of people went to sleep on the twenty-seventh, thinking, "Hey, we're above that level." That happened last time, which was nominally the one-in-100. Even with PMF, we can model that, but that's not a hard control; it can still be exceeded. I think within the community we have to create an understanding of what is possible and then have early warning systems so that we can get ahead of that predicting, get people out of harm's way, most importantly.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Mr Whitworth, are you familiar with the problem that councils on the North Coast are having regarding the definition with caravan parks? Caravan parks can be more on flood-prone land on the basis that they are movable dwellings that are there. But under the Local Government Act, movable dwelling includes manufactured homes.

**BRETT WHITWORTH:** Yes.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Can you update us on what's happening with that?

**BRETT WHITWORTH:** These are quite old provisions and quite old definitions. They date back to the time when a caravan was something that you could literally move around on wheels—these days caravans are less like that—and then the occasional cabin. But now what we find is manufactured homes—and they had always functioned as being both an important source of affordable housing as well as being a tourism area. The planning system has had to deal with the fact that every time we've gone in with an intervention, we've had to protect the rights of existing caravan parks and the people living in there, as well as trying to build up the idea of how to manage new development. I was with Tweed council; they took me to a couple of particular sites that had been caravan parks that they had transitioned into, effectively, manufactured home estates—

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** House estates, yes.

**BRETT WHITWORTH:** —one with an approval, one without an approval. When I say that, the approval was that that particular organisation, which I don't want to name, had gotten approval for a manufactured home estate. They were then entitled to put manufactured homes in there. The other was a previous caravan park where they had updated and put manufactured homes in onto the caravan park.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** These are very expensive, aren't they?

**BRETT WHITWORTH:** Yes, we are very much aware of it. It is a 20-plus-year-old problem. I say that because when I started dealing with building policy—I had building policy under my control in 1999, and people raised this issue about caravan parks. I moved away and the issue was still the same. But we are looking at the definition to see what we can do about strengthening that and also to recognise that—is our concept of what can be a manufactured home putting them into caravan parks, which had traditionally been located in flood-prone areas on the basis that you could pull the caravan out in a potential oncoming flood? That can't be done any more.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** No.

**BRETT WHITWORTH:** They create a risk.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** It's a loophole, clearly.

**BRETT WHITWORTH:** Yes.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** I guess the councils are in court, having to fight because of the loophole in the State's legislation, to try to stop them. Can't this simple amendment be made to remove that word? Secondly, will you help them fund the costs of fighting this case? All you're trying to do is stop more victims.

**BRETT WHITWORTH:** It's not a simple amendment in that it's an amendment to the Local Government Act, which—firstly, it's a piece of legislation that has been around for a long time. There's a lot of precedent in court—I'm not saying no, but I'm just saying it's not as simple as "just go and amend the definition". I have committed to the general manager of Tweed and I also want to take this up with the general manager and the planners at Ballina to talk to them about it and see what we can do—whether there are other means by which we can address that.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Could you please just view the land that they're fighting over in court at the moment, which is where Emigrant Creek meets the Richmond River?

**BRETT WHITWORTH:** This is in Ballina?

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** It is in Ballina. It was completely underwater, and you're looking at permanent housing being put in there.

**BRETT WHITWORTH:** I think I scared the living daylights out of a particular operator when I just asked for some details of what their approval was, and they got very tetchy.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** With respect to legislation, are you looking at a package review or is that something that can be brought forward maybe in a miscellaneous statute law revision?

**BRETT WHITWORTH:** I don't think it could be a statute law provision because of the interrelationships with a lot of other pieces of legislation. There are tenancy issues that you'd have to unpick. There are fair trading issues that would need to be unpicked as well. This is one of the reasons why it has sat for quite a time.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Accepting that—yes, it has—I'm trying to seek reassurance that work is being done on it and it will be solved because it is pretty urgent in terms of general statewide policy in relation to flood-prone land. This is something everyone would agree needs to be fixed.

**BRETT WHITWORTH:** Work is certainly being done. I'm not going to give you a promise on a time frame because of the complexity of the issue. But work is certainly being done.

**The CHAIR:** With the concurrence of members, we will break a few minutes early and resume at 4.30 p.m. That's the published time.

**(The witnesses withdrew.)**

**(Short adjournment)**

**Mr SHANE FITZSIMMONS**, Commissioner, Resilience NSW

**Mr DAVID WITHERDIN**, Deputy Secretary, Commercial Group, Department of Regional NSW, representing Public Works

**Dr JOHN TRACEY**, Deputy Director General, Biosecurity & Food Safety, DPI, Department of Regional NSW, affirmed and examined

**Mr MATT FULLER**, Deputy Secretary, Regional and Outer Metropolitan, Transport for NSW, sworn and examined

**Ms KAREN MCCARTHY**, Executive Director Security, Crisis & Emergency Management, Transport for NSW, sworn and examined

**Mr HOWARD COLLINS**, Chief Operations Officer, Greater Sydney, Transport for NSW, sworn and examined

**Ms ARMINDA RYAN**, Director, Incident Management and Environmental Health, Environment Protection Authority, affirmed and examined

**Mr ROB KELLY**, Executive Director, Regional Operations, Local Land Services, affirmed and examined

**The CHAIR:** Ladies and gentlemen, we will resume. There is provision for a short opening statement if anyone wishes to undertake that. Mr Fuller will go first and then Dr Tracey.

**MATT FULLER:** Before I talk about the role that Transport has played and continues to play, I'd like to first acknowledge the devastating impact of the floods. Obviously lives have been lost and tens of thousands more have been impacted. I also want to acknowledge that many of our own Transport team members were personally impacted. We have team members who have lost their homes, whose properties were inundated with water and who were worrying about their loved ones while they were still showing up for work and for the people of New South Wales. I thank those team members and acknowledge their professionalism and commitment to their local communities in extraordinarily difficult times.

Across the State, you will have heard that there has been significant damage to transport networks, with almost 3,000 kilometres of State roads sustaining damage. Across the Sydney rail network, around 180 kilometres of rail corridor have been closed down at varying times and around 215 kilometres of additional track has been impacted across the State. Although our understanding is still being updated daily, initial estimates indicate that the cost of damage to State, regional and local roads, our vehicular ferry infrastructure and rail infrastructure is over \$1.5 billion. Transport's role in the preparation, coordination and response to the events has been multifaceted. We were swift in responding to the impact on the State rail and road networks, repairing damaged access, restoring access, providing emergency transport, communicating with the public and working with our freight partners to ensure that communities continued to be serviced and receive essential supplies.

We've also provided emergency and ongoing shuttle services to enable travel between a number of the evacuation centres, support services, schools and homes during the crisis and in the aftermath for affected communities. Importantly, we also provided critical support to our local councils and local government partners, to assist their own response. Within 48 hours, we had made contact with every impacted council. Within the first two weeks, we had met with 24 of the affected councils, either face to face or virtually, and have been providing specialist technical expertise in the order of things like geotechnical engineers, amongst others, to assist and aid the response and the recovery. Within seven days, Transport, working with Minister Faraway, the Minister for Regional Transport and Roads, had provided \$24 million in advance prepayments to disaster-declared councils so that they could commence emergency works immediately.

While natural disasters are not uncommon in New South Wales and across Australia, the scale and the duration of these floods has, obviously, challenged us at Transport and more broadly. We've been proud of the way our people have risen to the task and continue to improve our response. Notwithstanding the scale of the task, Transport has made significant progress in repairing and rectifying the majority of the damage to our roads, rail, bridges and other parts of the network, whilst acknowledging there is still much to do. The work is certainly ongoing. To assist the Committee in terms of directing questions, I am the deputy secretary for the regional and outer metropolitan area of Transport, also covering freight responsibilities for the State wide. Mr Collins is the COO of the Greater Sydney area, and Ms McCarthy is our executive director of security, crisis and emergency management. We thank you for the opportunity to provide evidence this afternoon.

**JOHN TRACEY:** Thanks for the opportunity to speak today. I'd also like to acknowledge the devastating impact of the floods that will be felt for some time, affecting the way of life for residents, businesses, local government and industry. We in the Department of Primary Industries and Local Land Services are part of

these communities. We're connected to the regional communities. Many of our staff were directly affected. In addition to that, they were often the first responders in these situations as well. So I just acknowledge that in terms of our staff and the input there. In DPI we support the SES's combat agency for flood events. The Department of Primary Industries is a supporting agency and does have the responsibility for the agricultural and animal services functional area. That's the AASFA area. Local Land Services supports us in that function.

We activated these arrangements on 25 February to support SES in its combat role. That was three days prior to the major flooding event. AASFA's role is to lead the State's coordination of the agricultural animal services' resources. This includes support for primary producers, emergency care for animals, veterinary assessment, humane euthanasia and disposal of affected animals. Of course, the safety of people involved in these events, both the people affected and the people responding to it, must always be the highest priority. In order to effectively deliver the services under AASFA, we use State emergency management arrangements to coordinate activities with other agencies and supporting organisations. MOUs are held with around 20 key organisations, including RSPCA and Animal Welfare League, who are coordinated through State and local control centres.

Commercial arrangements are also used, such as those seen with Norco—a relationship commencing on 28 February to support on-ground assistance to landholders through the provision of fodder. This was a big success in this event. In the New South Wales floods, AASFA key services delivered included over 3,400 calls to the hotline, over 2,000 requests for assistance, distribution of more than 2,400 tonnes of fodder, responding to 885 requests, rehoming of 1,000 head of cattle displaced by floodwater, rehoming facilitated for another 5,000 head of cattle, the engagement of 72 private vet clinics, from Grafton to the Queensland border, with the assessment and care of flood-affected animals. The efforts and assistance provided by these local practices and organisations was another invaluable part of this response and key to a successful response. I acknowledge the 395 ASFA staff as well as these private and non-government organisations for their tireless efforts and committed support during this response.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** I hope my question is correctly addressed, but please redirect if not. I would like to ask Ms McCarthy about the M1 closure. Are there actual standards of the amount of water on the road that triggered the closure and, if so, what are they? Why were so many motorists trapped for such a long time? What assistance was offered to them?

**KAREN MCCARTHY:** Thank you for the question. I will redirect the question to Deputy Secretary Fuller.

**MATT FULLER:** Thank you for the question. We obviously assess the safety of major road corridors, including the M1, on a case-by-case basis. It really depends on a range of factors in terms of turnaround points and a raft of other things. In the case of the M1, I guess, just to clarify, I assume you are talking about the area north of Ballina?

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Chinderah.

**MATT FULLER:** Chinderah, Cudgen Tunnel and that sort of area. There were a number of people that were isolated, as you rightly identified. Some of those people were there, unfortunately, because they defied orders from both the traffic controls that were in situ at the time but also emergency services. Both transport and emergency services did provide ongoing support to many of the people that were stranded. In fact, some of them felt that they were so well equipped that they didn't want to go back. We had arranged for them to turn around and go back to Byron when the opportunity arose so that they could be re-accommodated, if you like, or put back to suitable accommodation in Byron. But they were quite happy to stay at Cudgen Tunnel. It took some convincing on our part to actually get some people to go back to Byron. There were a range of circumstances along that stretch of the M1, but obviously in these circumstances we never like to see people isolated. One of the primary functions that we do once we identify that is work with the emergency services to ensure that people are adequately provisioned with enough food and water, and critical supplies to see them through any sort of estimate of time frame, and we work with them to give them as much communication as possible so that they understand what they are in for.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** I'm curious about how much water was on the road. As I'm sure you are aware, once the M1 closed the entire region was then cut off from fuel and food supplies. It's a big decision.

**MATT FULLER:** Absolutely. Again, it really varies to the road itself and the type of the road—in the case of the M1. It is a very big decision and it is not taken lightly. It's assessed by both our teams and in conjunction with emergency services. The teams go to enormous lengths to really assess the safety of the roads and also, within that, assess what sort of controlled access can be arranged. There is often a public closure that is then followed by some sort of controlled access, including what you would have seen that we undertook, say, to get critical freight supplies into communities such as Yamba. The road was still publicly closed there, but working with the different

emergency services our teams were able to escort freight vehicles into Yamba with critical supplies to support life in that community. We had arranged previously to have freight vehicles stabled, at the ready. We were communicating with them. At that point in time there were a lot of unknowns and there were differences in time frames. We were able to give them estimates, and work with the freight community and the logistics organisations, and the grocery chain suppliers and things to have freight vehicles stationed and ready to provide access, as we do in the instance of fodder for primary producers and others. There are different degrees of closure. Certainly based on our safety assessments there are different sorts of access that we provide.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Because a mini minor won't make it through water but a B-double can.

**MATT FULLER:** Absolutely.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Can you just describe the Government's arrangements around that? In Yamba, in particular, I think it was a Coles truck that finally got through but it took a very long time.

**MATT FULLER:** It did. Obviously we were dealing with floodwaters over roads, the likes of which we have never seen in the part of the world. They were a lot deeper than we've ever experienced before. It was really a case of just waiting it out and understanding when we were able to provide safe access. Of course, you are absolutely correct about different vehicle types. The assessment is made on what is safe for all vehicle types and all road users. It does not take a lot of water over roads to close them off to some of those light vehicles, whether they are motorcycles or light passenger vehicles, as you say. But then in a coordinated way we look to provide access to some of the more critical supplies like freight, fuel—

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Except that that did not occur on this occasion, did it? A whole road closed. The vehicles that maybe could have continued on—the B-doubles with the supplies—were stopped along with the Mini Minors.

**MATT FULLER:** They were not stopped all at the same time. It really depends on specific examples from where we are talking about. There was controlled access. In some situations, controlled access under escort continues to happen in some areas of the State where we had safety implications around some of the slope stability, as an example. In the case of water over the road, obviously we make an informed choice around safety. It is absolutely not taken lightly, but it absolutely needs to occur when the floodwaters were rising the way they were. As you rightly say, that did end up isolating some users of the M1.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Can you take on notice the number of vehicles that were able to get through under controlled access on the M1 associated with the closure?

**MATT FULLER:** Sure. I would be happy to do so if we are able to provide that.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Local Land Services is here. I really need to ask you about the overgrown drains that nobody seems to be able to clear out. I know that you are not the only responsible agency, but how do we fix this problem?

**ROB KELLY:** In terms of the local drains in the cane growing areas?

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Everywhere, actually. I am living at Lennox Head and Ross Lane is closed for three weeks because national parks won't let us clean out the drain. It is everywhere. It has riddled the region and the flooding is getting worse, I am sure you would agree. What is the solution to the drains that are in disrepair and need to be dealt with? Multiple landholders make the problem extremely complex. I understand that.

**ROB KELLY:** Given it is not in Local Land Services' jurisdiction in terms of the control and management of those drains, I will take it on notice and get back to you on how we are working with other agencies to try to resolve those issues.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** In relation to the landslips—if I can stay with Local Land Services—is there capacity to do risk assessments for landslips? It came as a shock to everybody how much the landscape gave way. I wonder if you could comment on that as a safety issue and in terms of planning for the future?

**ROB KELLY:** In terms of the landslips, we were obviously getting a lot of reports from impacted landholders about landslips on their property and the safety issue related to that. Again, that is not something that we are directly responsible for, but we have been in discussions with the Public Works Advisory and Selcon about how we better assess that going forward because I think it is an important issue—not only landslips that impact roads, but landslips could impact private assets on properties and things like that. So how do we do a proper risk

assessment to make sure that, one, they are safe and, two, we can look at programs to try to resolve those in the future?

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** And identify the risk.

**ROB KELLY:** Yes.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** In relation to the EPA, Ms Arminda Ryan, there is a Boral facility in South Lismore—there are a number of industrial facilities, in fact, that were wiped out by the flood and caused a lot of damage to neighbouring residences. The evidence we had in Lismore from one woman, who says her house is covered with bitumen that has gone hard from the Boral facility, is that she is trying to get help from the EPA but has had no success. I wonder if you could update us on how you are assessing those matters? What is the magnitude of the task that you are dealing with?

**ARMINDA RYAN:** Yes, the South Lismore incident from Boral. The regulatory framework in New South Wales—the site was not licensed by the EPA under the Protection of the Environment Operations Act. Council is actually the lead authority for that, but we are definitely supporting them. We have done a site inspection with council because we have the same powers under that legislation as council. We're helping them through. We're providing technical advice from our experts in terms of the results they're getting from Boral. I understand Boral has engaged people—contractors—to clean up some of the properties and they are identified as the polluter, so council has the lead on that one, with our support.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Whether you license them or not, the contamination and the impact on those properties is something that I would have ordinarily expected the EPA to deal with. Can I just add, the council is overwhelmed with issues, so anything the EPA can do—Boral is a very big company and these are just—

**ARMINDA RYAN:** We're well aware of that because we stay in regular contact with the councils about their recovery needs. We're actually establishing a contamination program responding to the needs of councils, specifically Lismore, because there have been other instances of fuel through homes and that will provide them with access to expertise to do contamination assessments and remediation, if required. There is also a capacity-building piece there in terms of planning and preparedness for the next flood. So we're in touch with councils and we're developing that program currently. Until that's ready, we're providing support in any way that we can.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** I want to ask about Lismore's sewerage, which you do license, then my colleague will take over. Can you tell me what's happening with the sewage pouring into the Richmond River from Lismore?

**ARMINDA RYAN:** That was really unfortunate. The sewage treatment plant and Public Works might want to talk more about it. It lost all electrical supplies. It was devastated. So it is operating but is not fully operational. We are monitoring and Public Works is providing council with a lot of support because it will take time to do the repairs to get it fully operational. So we're monitoring water quality downstream of the sewage treatment plant as well as upstream. Given the scale of these floods, we're actually getting indicators of contamination upstream as well, so there is an impact to the Wilson River. But equally, because of the unprecedented scale of the floods, water quality is impacted upstream as well and it will take time for water quality to recover.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Dr Tracey, we heard evidence in Lismore, some criticism of the chief vet for not going up to the flood zone. Having known the chief vet, that seems out of character or unfair on her. I just wonder why that didn't happen.

**JOHN TRACEY:** It was 25 February when we initiated the flood response. On that same day we had a detection, or multiple detections, of Japanese encephalitis confirmed. It's a category 1 exotic animal disease and that means that it has human health implications. Japanese encephalitis is a mosquito-borne virus carried by mosquitoes. Wild birds also are a potential factor in that. It was picked up in piggeries. Piggeries are a good sentinel species to detect that virus. That triggered a national response. There was, as you would imagine, a very urgent need for the chief vet to put an emergency structure in place for the Japanese encephalitis response in relation to that.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** I understand there is, or there will be, an after-action review of your involvement after the floods. I just wonder where that's at and have we got any learnings out of that already?

**JOHN TRACEY:** As with all responses, we take a look at doing an after-action review. In this case we've got an independent person in to do that. So more than 400 people have been interviewed—external farmers, private vets as well as internal staff. We take that seriously in terms of what we're taking out of these events and

how we improve that. Those findings are still being put together. I guess, from an initial point of view, some of the feedback that I've heard about has been in relation to the value of our research stations in DPI. There was some information from stakeholders. The response team, the recovery team, members of the community really appreciated that space to undertake work to be able to continue with business-critical activity as well in the community. For example, our Wollongbar research station is currently being used by New South Wales police forensics. It's critical business in terms of its set-up and continuation as well as accommodation. I guess the key learning from that for us is the importance of investing in these research stations and making sure we've got the right infrastructure in place and that we do have good access during emergency events. They were also used in bushfire response as well for the provision of fodder, so it's a reminder there.

The second learning for us, I suppose, is around the number of staff that are trained. Given the fact that we had multiple responses on here—we had a flood response as well as Japanese encephalitis. We do have quite an extensive number of trained staff across AASFA available to us. We've got more than 500 highly trained staff as well as over 1,600 who have received foundational training. But when you've got areas that are affected and our staff are affected by a big event like this, plus you've got multiple events on—it's also that reminder of, "You know what? We're going to need to make sure that we've got additional training for additional staff to be able to deploy in these events and not only staff but those of external agencies and the private sector as well."

Probably the third finding is around local relationships for us and the importance of building those local relationships. I mentioned Norco, but that was a really good example of being able to engage with a commercial operator that was local and that could immediately deploy and start to assist us in distribution of fodder. I think those relationships are going to be really important. The linkages in with our private vets are critical as well. They're a critical part of what we do in response. Those relationships through Local Land Services and DPI that we have—the need to make sure that we continue to strengthen those going forward. There'll be other learnings but those are the key ones.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Can I just ask another question? Mr Kelly, I'd like to ask about the clean-up of the Richmond River. Is there a plan? What is the cost? When can that occur and when do you think water will be of sufficient quality that Ballina can reopen its beaches?

**ROB KELLY:** In terms of—I'm not sure what you're asking in terms of Local Land Services.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** The Richmond River. In terms of Local Land Services, you're the regional operation. I should check. Does that cover—how many rivers or catchments does that cover?

**ROB KELLY:** Well, it covers all the catchments in the State in terms of Local Land Services regions, but in terms of responsibility for waterways—

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** So you're in charge of all regional operations for the State. Is that correct?

**ROB KELLY:** Yes.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Not for the North Coast region.

**ROB KELLY:** No. The North Coast region sits under my role but, in terms of river or riverine environments, we're not in charge of that.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Who is in charge of that?

**ROB KELLY:** That would sit in DPE or Water depending on which area you're looking at.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** I think Ms Ryan just put her hand up.

**ARMINDA RYAN:** The EPA is leading the shoreline and waterway clean-up program. What that involves is—we've got specialist marine contractors, so we're deploying upwards of 50 crew each day cleaning up different rivers from Hawkesbury to the Queensland border. We've been in the Richmond River. We are asking—we work closely with councils, Transport for NSW, Maritime, DPI Fisheries to get reports of large debris. We've been pulling out even reverse vending machines from the Tweed River. There are a lot of chemical containers that we're collecting as well. To date from 1 March we've already removed more than 7½ thousand cubic metres of debris from our waterways. That's in terms of the bulky debris. We're trying to get it quickly before it makes its way to the ocean and to the beaches. Our crews were working on the Ballina beaches as well, removing—they call it "anthropogenic", so man-made debris. They remove green debris—we're not deploying them to collect small sticks, but where they might pose a navigational hazard if they're deployed again into the waterways.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Are you in charge of the plan for that? Can you tell me what the funding is?

**ARMINDA RYAN:** The EPA has received over \$200 million—and that's EPA's environmental services—for a number of flood recovery programs. Some are still being developed because we had to prioritise based on needs being told to us by the community and councils. I can come back to you with the actual dollars because there are a lot of sub-programs within it where we're doing sonar surveys to look for navigational hazards that are submerged that we can't see but we want to make the rivers safe. There's another program related to that, which is where flood debris was left on—it is not in the waterway now, but it was left when the waters receded, so on low-lying public land. I can get, if you like—

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** If you could take that on notice, thank you.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** I could confirm for you, Ms Cusack, that it is a \$350 million clean-up package, with the funding targeted to EPA and PWA.

**Ms SUE HIGGINSON:** Is that the whole—for which area?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** For flooding operations across the 61 LGAs that are declared natural disasters.

**The Hon. MARK BANASIAK:** I might ask some rounding-out final questions of you, Mr Fitzsimmons. In a previous session, you were talking about State plans, subplans, local plans. I went and did some lunchtime reading. The subplan for the North Coast hasn't been updated since 2019, so you're not recognised as an agency in it. The local Ballina flood plan hasn't been updated since 2013, Tweed shire not since 2014 and Lismore not since 2018. You have got three local plans that were impacted by the floods—no reference to Resilience NSW or their role. On your website it says you're leading disaster and emergency efforts, from prevention to recovery. What confidence can you give the Committee that you are able to actually prepare for floods, when it seems you can't even get plans and subplans and local plans up to date?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** The State has got a comprehensive planning framework, and we—

**The Hon. MARK BANASIAK:** But it's not up to date.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** I'll have to take that on notice and have a look. I wasn't aware of those local EM subplans. But I do know, through the State register, that we've got all the key plans up to date and due for review at the moment. And the most recent meeting of the State Emergency Management Committee, which we chair and facilitate—all this preparation and coordination—are across those planning instruments. The particular local EM ones that you refer to, I'll have to take on notice and follow up out of session.

**The Hon. MARK BANASIAK:** Obviously, this Committee has taken a lot of extensive evidence about, or criticism of, Resilience NSW. I respect that you would probably disagree with a lot of that evidence. But, as Mr Roberts pointed out, we had an assistant commissioner in Mick Willing, who led the bushfire recovery, which was prior to Resilience NSW. You have now got Deputy Commissioner Mal Lanyon leading the recovery of floods—another police officer. What evidence can you point the Committee to that would suggest that Resilience NSW, in this instance, has performed roles or actions better than previous agencies, in past disasters, would have traditionally performed?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** Interestingly, I can confirm a number of things there. Just to clarify, it is not unusual for any government organisation or entity that has a name change—we don't spend our time going back for every plan to edit it. It's a convention across government that when there are name changes we understand the transition. You will see through those plans—

**The Hon. MARK BANASIAK:** That was a previous question.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** I'm just clarifying. You will understand, OEM—we inherited OEM. The other point to clarify is that one of the reasons the Government decided to establish Resilience NSW was following their intervention to put Mick Willing in place, effectively performing my role as the State recovery controller leading that bushfire recovery effort. The equivalent of Mal Lanyon's position was performed by about four different regional recovery coordinators, which were a combination of contractors and ex-government employees and those sorts of people across the State, for the bushfire recovery efforts. One of the key learnings out of that was to see an organised, structured approach, rather than the old OEM model, where there was only Sydney-based people—was actually to have regional presence to ensure that we could adapt and accommodate the regional appointment of recovery officers.

I can also say that the interventions in the last couple of years, particularly since our existence—if you look at the flood response in the Northern Rivers, even though it is extraordinary and unprecedented, compared

to the 2017 flood event, so many grants, natural disaster declarations, are four to six weeks ahead of where they would have been, even in that 2017 event. And even significant interventions in the last couple of years with the 2021 floods, the intervention of the washout clean-up crew and coordinating fire services, ADF, public works, environmental services—those clean-up programs to help remove debris and belongings of people has occurred at a remarkable pace. Indeed, this time round, with the lessons we learned from last year, which was a critical intervention in the relief phase transitioning between response and recovery—the amount of waste that was removed last year in four weeks was being removed in four days through this event. The coordination and cohesion has seen a significant advancement. That's cold comfort to those that are displaced and affected, but even the other—

**The Hon. MARK BANASIAK:** The testimony we received was that waste and rubbish didn't start getting removed until Mal Lanyon turned up. All of the rollout of grants, which haven't truly been fully realised because it was only 7 per cent, you are saying that is all because of Resilience NSW?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** What I'm saying to you is for matters like the coordination and determination of grants packages—the Government making those announcements—absolutely, it is centralised and coordinated through Resilience NSW at a scale and a pace like we've never seen before. I can absolutely affirm that the clean-up and wash-out of buildings and premises and removal of all that debris has been initiated and led through our initiative, and coordinated and managed through those EM arrangements. Yes, natural disaster declarations are occurring much quicker and much more organised than ever before—100 per cent, I can say that. As Mr Lanyon clarified in the evidence only moments ago, as much as he's absolutely deserving of praise and recognition, it was also about timing. We were transitioning out of the response phase with the SES leading, looking to transfer over to the recovery element. It was absolutely beneficial to have Mal there to continue those EOC operations and for the LEOCONs, the police commanders and those operational arrangements to run parallel with the recovery inception.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** Dr Tracey, in your response earlier in relation to the chief vet, you said that the chief vet was dealing with the outbreak of Japanese encephalitis. Who did they delegate responsibility to at that time to deal with the emergency unfolding in the Northern Rivers for all of the livestock that were impacted by the floods?

**JOHN TRACEY:** Typically the chief vet is not responsible for that aspect of the response. In the case here, we have a State control centre and we've got local control centres. Assistance in relation to animals, particularly veterinary assistance, is arranged through MoUs and organisations such as Animal Welfare League and RSPCA, which were engaged on 28 February to assist in that way. Local vets are coordinating the response in a number of ways. We've also got an ability to be pulling in our district vets in Local Land Services, which were engaged in response.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** In the first five days, or whatever, what was DPI's role? I'm sure you're aware of criticism of the fact that the Government was missing in action and it all largely fell to private vets to drop fodder. What did the Government do in that time?

**JOHN TRACEY:** We initiated staff in the response on 25 February, which was three days prior. On the twenty-eighth we had staff on ground, which included liaison with private vets as well as district vets through Animal Welfare League and RSPCA.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** How many staff did you have on ground, and where were they?

**JOHN TRACEY:** Overall, we had 395 staff engaged at different parts in the response. In that first day we had at least 13 staff on ground in the local control centre.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** Did that include dropping fodder to stranded livestock?

**JOHN TRACEY:** Norco were involved in the fodder distribution early, so I can get you the dates on that if you'd like.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** Yes, or you can do that on notice. We heard about the failure of the 1800 number too. It was very difficult to get onto that number and there was a failure to return calls. Are you aware of criticisms around the 1800 number?

**JOHN TRACEY:** I'm aware of criticisms. That 1800 number is always activated. We've got a permanent number that's well advertised during emergency events. In an emergency situations we do centralise that. In a non-emergency event, people that call that number will be diverted through to their Local Land Services for assistance. We kicked that hotline on very early in the response and advertised that number early on.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** It wasn't a new number; it was the same number?

**JOHN TRACEY:** It was the same number. It's the same one we use in every response, including bushfires as well.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** What we have heard from two vets that appeared before the inquiry was in fact that the private helicopters were out doing fodder drops before DPI and LLS. We heard of situations. There was a farmer, for example, who was stranded and ended up writing "H-A-Y" out of sheets of corrugated iron they salvaged from their property and around it because they needed fodder dropped for their animals. We actually heard of a complete breakdown, but from your side of things it worked perfectly well and the animals were able to get the help they need from the Government, and working with the private sector as you suggest.

**JOHN TRACEY:** Yes, the private sector is a key part of that. In terms of the early days in terms of helicopter, we arrange helicopters through the State Air Desk. The priority there is on rescue in the first couple of days and so we employed aircraft when it was safe and we could do so. But in addition to that there was distribution of fodder already occurring through Norco in a Primex site set up at Casino.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** I want to turn to questions around the M1 motorway. Is there a review underway within Transport for NSW around the potential impact of the M1 on exacerbating the extent of flooding in parts of the Northern Rivers? That would be to you, Mr Fuller, is that correct?

**MATT FULLER:** That's correct, yes. Thank you for the question. We take it on ourselves to review anytime there is a natural disaster on any of our infrastructure to understand what has occurred and whether the infrastructure has had any impact or role in that. Yes, we are looking at the impact of the flooding and if the M1 had any role in it. Maybe I will step back a moment to give you some background and confidence. When the M1 was developed, it was done so under a very strict set of conditions. Those conditions are outlined by the Minister for Planning, and we worked with the Department of Planning and the project team responsible at the time and we did extensive modelling and extensive engagement with the community on what flooding may occur, including local stakeholders, local councils, SES and anybody who had information on flooding to develop a flood model.

In addition to that, and in consultation with DPE at the time and the Department of Planning, we also had an independent expert, a gentleman by the name of Mark Babister who is a renowned hydrologist, who spent many months not only in the community but working with the project teams to further refine the flood model and to make further recommendations and further enhancements to the highway at that point. That was undertaken. There was an extensive process in terms of the design for the M1 Pacific Motorway, but community members have made quite a bit of commentary in recent months about whether or not the highway may have impacted on flooding and specific examples.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** There were basically dams on one side of the highway and not on the other.

**MATT FULLER:** I guess the point I would make is this flooding well exceeds any flooding that we've ever experienced before.

**Ms SUE HIGGINSON:** And that was told during the planning process.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Fuller, you would be familiar with a road in the Hawkesbury called Cornwallis Road. That's the huge canyon. That's the road that has washed away.

**MATT FULLER:** I'm not familiar with that specific road, no.

**The CHAIR:** You're not familiar with it?

**MATT FULLER:** No, I'm not.

**The CHAIR:** It has been in the national media. Is anyone else from your team familiar with that road?

**MATT FULLER:** In the Hawkesbury?

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** It's Greater Sydney. Ask Mr Collins.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Cate. Mr Collins?

**HOWARD COLLINS:** Thank you for the question. I will take that one on notice. I cover the Greater Sydney area, so Galston Gorge, Garie Road and all those other roads which have had significant geotechnical challenges.

**The CHAIR:** I am asking about Cornwallis Road. If you're going to take it on notice, we would like to know what the estimated cost is to repair the road, what assistance the State Government is offering to the council to do it, what the timetable is and if there are any other roads in the Hawkesbury area that have been affected by the recent floods that come within that scope.

**HOWARD COLLINS:** Certainly. Just to be general, I will be very quick. We are supporting local council. Many of these roads, as you mentioned—and that particular one, I think—are council roads. We are working very closely and providing funding for councils to deal with their own issues, and many of those are in that area—certainly, Hawkesbury and the northern part of Greater Sydney. But I will take that on notice.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. I want to swing back to Mr Fitzsimmons. Earlier, in response to my colleague Mark Banasiak, you said that the creation of Resilience NSW was not just a name change—I wrote it down when you said it, talking about that.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** What is the current FTE for Resilience NSW?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** I might have that handy, actually.

**The CHAIR:** As of most recent. In budget estimates, it said that headcount as of 20 April 2022 was two hundred and—here it is. At 30 June 2021, it was 105. At 30 June 2020, it was 103. As of 20 April 2022, 240.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** That's the figure I have here, in that order—245 people in total.

**The CHAIR:** How many of those 245 people working in Resilience are SES senior executive service members? I could help you out, if you don't know.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** Twenty-seven.

**The CHAIR:** Yes, it has gone up one more since I asked. What's the total salary—

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** No, there is a difference between an FTE and occupancy. I think I would have talked last time there were 26 incumbents.

**The CHAIR:** Twenty-six. Now there are 27.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** As a matter of fact, I have 26 filled and one still vacant. So I've given you the figures in the same order.

**The CHAIR:** What is the projection? Is it continuing to grow? It has gone up from 103 to 105 to 245. What is the next projected—

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** As we talked about at estimates previously, I think you will find it reflects the transition from the old agency to the new agency and the recruitment and establishment of personnel, the vast majority of whom were recruited and appointed in the tail end of 2021.

**The CHAIR:** So 27 SES positions?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** Correct.

**The CHAIR:** What are those 27 people on senior public service salaries doing?

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** I think I have provided details and org charts to the estimates and to the Committee before, but they effectively head up the directorates and the regional appointments around the State.

**The CHAIR:** I would like if you could take on notice, please, all 27 positions.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** No problem.

**The CHAIR:** Don't name the individuals, just the titles of the positions.

**SHANE FITZSIMMONS:** No problem.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Who do I talk to about the betterment funding for road repair? Is that you, Mr Collins or Mr Fuller? It depends on where it is, does it?

**MATT FULLER:** That would be me.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** It's you, Mr Fuller? Can I be clear: My understanding is the Government has made an announcement of \$312 million. Is that correct?

**MATT FULLER:** That's correct.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Is that just for local roads, or is that for local and State roads?

**MATT FULLER:** It's for a local and State roads, and the funding was specifically put in place to deal with roads that don't come under the category B funding. In the case where we have a very relevant case for betterment and added resilience, that funding has been put in place, and it's the first time, to my understanding,

where we have partnered with the Federal Government to have that package. It is designed to be a stage one package. Obviously, councils and the State, we have access to category B funding for reinstatement or restoration of roads under the natural disaster relief arrangements. But, in the case of adding significant resilience and betterment, particularly where we have seen examples where we have slope—as highlighted earlier, in some of the slope failures that have occurred, there are complete relocations and greenfield site development to be undertaken. There are choices to be made about alternate routes. This funding was really designed to further complement what's there under the national disaster relief and give both the ability to councils and the State to identify some of the points of vulnerability and to deal with those. At this point, what we've done is—

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Can I stop you there? What is the split between State and local roads for that?

**MATT FULLER:** We've identified a 60 per cent split towards local roads and 40 per cent for State initially. As I said, it's designed to be a stage one. Once we undertake and foresee that that funding would be exhausted, then we've certainly highlighted that we would be looking to go back to Cabinet and to our Federal Government colleagues to further expand the fund if it was required. So it is—

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** If it's 60 per cent then local government areas will have around \$187 million for the betterment fund. Is that correct?

**MATT FULLER:** That's correct, yes.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** We obviously took evidence from each of the local councils when we were up there. I think my back of the envelope had it at at least half a billion dollars in terms of their roads alone. They've identified that. That's a pretty significant gap.

**MATT FULLER:** No, this is designed as a top-up. Obviously, they have access to the category B funding, the restoration arrangements, under the existing natural disaster relief funding. This funding is not designed to meet the full restoration; it is designed to be enhancement for betterment—

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** No, but will the category B meet full restoration?

**MATT FULLER:** Where it doesn't, this package is designed to top that up and to complement that and to enable us to make really informed choices about betterment and further resilience in the network going forward. That was what it was designed to, not to replace category B but actually complement—

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** That's not what I'm asking. I'm asking what the split—as you're aware, there's significant damage, and building back better will be very expensive. Some of the projects we saw—I reckon, probably two or three could eat all of that \$187 million. I'm trying to get a sense of how much the gap is going to be really closed.

**MATT FULLER:** That's something that we need to work through over time. Obviously, the—

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Who's in charge of working through that?

**MATT FULLER:** Our department is responsible for working through that and to work in conjunction with local government. In the past, we haven't played such a close role with local government in assisting them in their restoration efforts. But in this time, obviously, that's been really warranted, and we've really stepped in and provided that support. As I said, in the initial few days we made access to the councils up there in the Northern Rivers region, advanced \$24½ million so they could just get on with the job of engaging contractors, undertaking the restoration work and meeting those immediate connection requirements of restoration. The category B funding will go a long way to supporting the recovery effort.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** I just don't understand exactly how the category B funding operates. I do realise that it replaces and it flows through and it's Federal and it's State and it flows through based on application. But, surely, there's modelling or the councils—for example, I think Richmond River or one of them said, "There's \$80 million that we need to fund." You're not telling me that they're going to get \$80 million through category B funding, are you? That would be good, but that's not my understanding of how it works.

**MATT FULLER:** They may well if it meets the requirements that are set out by the Federal Government in terms of the restoration. Where it doesn't meet the requirements and where there's the increased resilience, betterment, relocation and other decisions to be made, that's where this \$312 million steps in.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Well, \$187 million. Let's be clear here.

**MATT FULLER:** It's \$187 million for local government, yes.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** I want to ask about the vet issue. Dr Tracey, I'm struck this afternoon at, I suppose, the complete gap in terms of some of the feedback that we had from local private vets when we were up north and your explanation of what occurred. Are you aware of the evidence in the submissions that two vets gave us for the inquiry? Have you seen that?

**JOHN TRACEY:** I have seen some of that, yes.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** They make some pretty strong allegations around lack of coordination, with very, very poor animal welfare outcomes. Do you reject those allegations?

**JOHN TRACEY:** I guess, in response, it's a tense time. People who are involved in that are in an extreme situation. I guess what I would say is that our response was effective at acting early. We did act early in terms of engaging with the Animal Welfare League, the RSPCA and vets. We had district vets on board. That structure is a good one in terms of the response through the local control centres.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** The allegation was that no fodder arrived for between five and six days. Are you saying that is not the case, in terms of fodder on land where animals were?

**JOHN TRACEY:** I can get the dates of when fodder was on land for you.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** I think it's in the submission, actually. It's five days.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** So it's five to six days and the general guidelines are three days. The frustration that we heard from vets and, to a lesser degree, farmers was that they are held to very high animal welfare standards, as they should be, but they felt that the Government was missing when they were trying to actually deal with that and it resulted in poor animal welfare outcomes.

**JOHN TRACEY:** In response to that, what you've got in a flood situation is typically animals that, in this case, were in quite good condition. You have some animals that die in a flood and you've got other animals that tend to survive. You've got animals in good condition. I guess the priority for us was to get in there as soon as we could. We do work through the State Air Desk—

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Just to clarify, it was five to six days before you got to them.

**JOHN TRACEY:** I will have to check those numbers for you.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Given that all communications were out and there was no internet and we had farmers using bits of their ripped-off roofs to ask for hay and literally laying it out on corrugated iron on their properties, can you tell me what aerial surveillance was done by the LLS or DPI in those first days? If it took five or six days to get fodder there, when was the aerial surveillance done and who did it?

**JOHN TRACEY:** There were ASFA helicopters employed in the response working on 5 March.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** So that is five days. Really, there was a gap of five days before things got going. Is that accurate?

**JOHN TRACEY:** In terms of that, we had staff set up in a State control centre and local control centre. In terms of the actual employment of helicopters, that's coordinated through the State Air Desk. The priority there is on rescue attempts.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Dr Tracey, you weren't here. Some of us have been in these committees for a little while now. At the time, my colleague and I asked the National Parks and Wildlife Service what was happening with their choppers and the Government was very quick to slap us down and say, "Well, they're not rescue helicopters." Clearly there could have been a role for National Parks and Wildlife Service helicopters to get aerial surveillance up and going. Was that ever requested, or is it just that you give it all to the air desk and they prioritise a list? I'm trying to understand.

**JOHN TRACEY:** The air desk has an ability to deploy helicopters in relation to that. You've got a situation here where there is congested airspace. You've got to be falling into a system here that does allow us to be working in with the SES in terms of what that priority looks like. What I can say in terms of fodder is that we were distributing fodder from 3 March. Despite the dates—

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Where to?

**JOHN TRACEY:** From Norco at Casino—

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** From Norco to on-ground farms or to other distribution places?

**JOHN TRACEY:** Fodder was being picked up at Norco at Casino and distributed from there to animals in need. There was active work done in terms of the distribution of fodder from that date.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** What about to properties? I'm also asking about properties that were not able to drive on roads to get that and were relying on drops. I'm trying to work out when—

**JOHN TRACEY:** From 5 March we had helicopters available to distribute fodder in addition to what was being done already from the Norco site at Casino.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** It is my understanding that Minister Saunders arrived on or around 9 March to talk to people at Casino. Is that correct?

**JOHN TRACEY:** I would have to check the date for you. It sounds right, yes.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Again, the evidence provided to us was that private vets were begging him to get more action on what was occurring. Can you let me know—and this is probably to Mr Kelly as well—what instructions or discussions you had with the Minister after his meeting on 9 March that changed anything you were doing?

**JOHN TRACEY:** I can take that on notice.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** You are not aware of who spoke to the Minister? Who would the Minister have spoken to? He was with Mr Hansen.

**JOHN TRACEY:** I can take that on notice. The feedback was similar to what we heard around some of the concerns from some specific individuals in terms of some private vets.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Mr Kelly, can you also take that on notice if you cannot provide that to me now?

**ROB KELLY:** Absolutely.

**JOHN TRACEY:** In terms of veterinary care, we have animals that are in good condition here. We did not see any evidence of animals that had succumbed as a result of a lack of veterinary care in the response at all. If that information is coming forward, we would like to hear that, but that was certainly not the case for us. We were not short of veterinary assistance. We had a lot of vets actively engaged throughout the response, from day one right through.

**The CHAIR:** On that note, we have reached 5.30 p.m. That is the end of the hearing. I thank everybody for their time. A number of questions were taken on notice. The secretariat will be in contact to ensure that deadlines are adhered to.

**(The witnesses withdrew.)**

**The Committee adjourned at 17:31.**