

**REPORT ON PROCEEDINGS BEFORE**

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

**CORRECTED**

**At Ballina RSL Club, 1 Grant Street, Ballina NSW 2478, on Monday 30 May 2022**

**The Committee met at 13:50.**

**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



**The CHAIR:** Welcome to the inquiry into the response to major flooding across New South Wales in 2022. Welcome to the first hearing of the Select Committee on the response to major flooding across New South Wales in 2022. This inquiry will examine a number of matters 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.

Before I commence, I acknowledge the Dyirbal people of the Bundjalung nation, who are the traditional custodians of the land on which we are meeting today. I pay respect to Elders past, present and emerging, and celebrate the diversity of Aboriginal peoples and their ongoing cultures and connections to the land 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 hear from a number of stakeholders including local members, community groups and cane growers. 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.

Today's hearing is 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 the broadcasting guidelines, I remind media representatives that they must take responsibility for what they publish about the Committee's 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. Therefore, I urge witnesses to be careful about comments you may make to the media or to others after you complete your 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 terms of reference of the inquiry 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 that question on notice. Written answers to questions taken on notice are to be provided within 21 days. If witnesses wish to hand up documents they should do so through the Committee staff. To aid the audibility of today's hearing I remind both Committee members and witnesses to speak into the microphones. Finally, would everyone please turn their mobile phones to silent for the duration of the hearing.

**Councillor MICHAEL LYON**, Mayor, Byron Shire Council, affirmed and examined

**Councillor SHARON CADWALLADER**, Mayor, Ballina Shire Council, sworn and examined

**Mr JOHN TRUMAN**, Director, Civil Services Division, Ballina Shire Council, sworn and examined

**Ms TAMARA SMITH**, Member for Ballina, before the Committee

**The CHAIR:** Under the provisions of the Committee witnesses are entitled to make a short opening statement, if they wish, followed by questions. The Committee intends to be quite flexible in the way that questions are distributed. Would any of you like to make an opening statement?

**MICHAEL LYON:** I will make a short statement. In the Byron shire we covered the whole range of impacts. We had three different types. We had flash flooding in that second event, we had riverine flooding in both events and we also had quite significant landslips—landslides—across the hinterland that are continuing. We had something like 2,200 properties that were directly in the flooding areas, 1,600 of those which had water inside the property. About 192 properties were isolated in the hinterland when roads were closed and cut off by landslips and the like. I think for me I just want to make the point that if you fail to plan then the plan is to fail. I think that is what we saw in a number of areas as a result of this devastation. But it is important that we look back at the past to learn lessons not to blame but to make sure that we plan better for the future.

The main areas I want to cover just briefly are housing and, for me, resilience means having a really functioning housing market and our inability to deal with the existing crisis that existed in housing that we had been at pains to point out. We put planning proposals forward on things like tiny homes, caps on short-term letting. We have been attempting this for several years and we haven't been able to get those through. What that meant was that the exacerbation caused by the floods and that existing crisis left us really exposed. It has made things so much harder in the aftermath of the floods. In the community response it is clear that we can't have a standing disaster response team for region-wide disasters like this and the immediate response is always going to be led and driven by the community and staffed by the community. But since we know that let's prepare for that and ensure we have appropriately trained community leaders who can coordinate volunteers and be stood up in emergency situations.

I think we should have these in each quarter of a community so that we can respond in each area of where we can expect impacts. On the Government response, look it's good we have a Resilience NSW and there has been some good political commitments, particularly at the State level with funding commitments and that's been really good that we have felt supported at that level and, particularly, with the announcement of Betterment funding that we can build back better in the future and prepare, I think is really encouraging. That is the first time we have really seen a substantial commitment to Betterment funding. Just to pull out a couple of points, the Department of Communities and Justice, I just didn't think it was good enough in terms of the response, the linking in with the SES, the way that we had an evacuation centre informally stood up but it actually wasn't formally staffed by the DCJ. They didn't really make the effort to get in there and make sure that that happened in Mullumbimby and that left residents stranded with nowhere to go, with no supplies at that evacuation centre. The evacuation centre itself was centimetres away from flooding. We had distressed residents actually returning home to flood-affected properties because it was the better option.

Communications widespread were just not good enough. Telecommunication networks going down and being out for weeks during and post flood. Interagency communication was an issue. Communication was a big thing—evacuation warnings being too late, not giving people the time to leave and I think, yes, particularly in terms of Telstra I think there are some serious questions there about the way the network is designed and whether the privatisation of Telstra went too far. I am just interested to know how that could be improved so that we are, again the catchword being more resilient for the future. Finally, the Bureau of Meteorology predictions. I think instead of having one prediction we could be looking at a range of predictions. Blind Freddy could have seen during that second event that that rain was coming in off the coast. It was predicted by other sites. Why wasn't it predicted by the BOM? I think questions need to be asked there. We are all aware of the problems that people have had getting the grants that have been announced, the lack of availability and take-up of those and systems there needing improving. I appreciate the effort you are making with this inquiry and hopefully we learn those lessons for the future.

**SHARON CADWALLADER:** Thank you for coming to Ballina for this inquiry. I would also like to welcome you to Ballina. Ballina has suffered significantly in both events, the riverine and the storm event. We had over 700 properties directly impacted. We had 2,500 people in our evacuation centres. We had significant rain damage and we were cut off. We were absolutely cut off. Was this a surprise to us? No, it wasn't because our flood modelling told us this was going to happen. We just haven't had the mitigation money to spend on what was

needed in order to make us safer here in our community. We didn't have our evacuation routes, our culvert work and floodgate management as well. Mitigation forms a major part moving forward when we have 97 per cent of funds being spent on recovery and 3 per cent on mitigation. Those numbers just really don't add up.

In 2019 council declared a state of climate emergency in response to council's prepared and recently adopted climate change policy. The recommendation would be that the New South Wales Government reinstate climate change predictions and policy in a statement to guide the planning undertaken by coastal councils for floodplain management. That would be a recommendation. Our major issue to start with was communications—totally inadequate. For over a week we were totally isolated here. We had staff that had to go across the border to Queensland in order to communicate. We had runners going between evacuation centres. Where the infrastructure was built, I presume, would have been in a flood-prone area and should never have been. I would say that seriously needs to be looked at. We had food shortages, medical shortages, fuel supplies became critically low and it just needed addressing.

The ADF that came were very helpful, but they came without any vehicles, without any plant and equipment. Of course, drainage was an issue. We needed drains cleared urgently, so we needed equipment. There is still lots of drainage to be cleaned as well. The DJC, whilst they are wonderful people—they do a great job, but they are totally under-resourced. They were absolutely trounced with the magnitude of this event. They were inadequately resourced. Housing, of course—we had a housing crisis before this event. A lot of people here—we had 200 homeless people who lost their homes on the riverbanks. That has to be a priority. We need housing for our people and we need the social housing projects to run parallel with the temporary housing villages that are being set up now for all these displaced people. I can't stress highly enough how important this is. It would appear—you would think that it would be just one of those things, it would be a basic need, and that is what needs to happen.

The SES volunteers do a wonderful job and we applaud them for what they do, but they are under-resourced. They should have had satellite phones. The State Government has the management of SES and RFS. Why don't they have the total management and provide the infrastructure for them as well? With local government only getting 3 per cent of all taxes, I really think it is a responsibility of the State Government to provide the infrastructure so that they are adequately prepared in a disaster like we have just seen. As well as the warning systems, it needs to be professionally led as well. Professionally led management is of critical importance, as we have just found out. It shines a bright light on what we need to do, what we need to do better than last time so we are prepared.

Of course, mental health—we all know that this is starting to bite into our communities and it needs to be managed from the ground up, not from the top down, to make it easier for people so that the locals can help the locals, like we have seen in this recovery. It is community helping community and I think our best cues comes from our community within. Insurance is a major issue. People weren't insured or were under-insured; basically, it was just too expensive to insure. We have a major gap there. If we can get an extension of the insurance pool down from northern Australia that has been established into our Northern Rivers community, that would go some way to giving people confidence to start up again. At this stage they don't have that confidence because they just simply cannot afford insurance, or can't get it. We need something to take place there.

Our planning instruments also need to be addressed as well. The LEP needs flexibility on the standard templates. How do we manage these zones in these floodplain areas? They need to be more flexible and adaptable because they are too rigid as we start to plan for the future—so more flexibility with those planning instruments. The Federal and New South Wales governments need to develop a funding program directly targeting development of flood mitigation infrastructure. As I have already mentioned, this is critically important. It's better to mitigate against than try to mop up afterwards. We have seen the results of that. Public warnings and evacuation routes—all of these things are critically important. Equipment and communications—and communications being absolutely critical. I guess that covers off on the major issues that I would like addressed. There are certainly a lot of things that need addressing if we are to build back, if we are to support our communities when they need it most. I will leave it at that. Thank you.

**Ms TAMARA SMITH:** I would also like to acknowledge the Nyangbul and Bundjalung people and pay my respects to Elders past, present and emerging and all Aboriginal people here today and note the enormous and devastating impact on the Cabbage Tree Island community, with 26 of the 27 homes needing to be demolished, as well as the school. I think it is testament to my colleagues that both mayors have been comprehensive because they are listening to the community. I am sure the Committee—thank you so much for coming—is seeing the patterns emerge. I will focus in my opening remarks on two issues. One is to put on record my incredible gratitude to our emergency service personnel, local and all of those who came from across the State and country, all of the local volunteers, all of the unsung heroes, members of our community. They are too countless to do justice to today—right across the Northern Rivers region and including all of the charities and all of those organisations and

the resilience groups, and all of the mud army that came from interstate, and on and on. I am in absolute awe of our community and what we have done as we emerge through the recovery of this.

I made 30 recommendations to the O'Kane-Fuller inquiry, but to me the first 72 hours and what people went through is unacceptable by anyone's standards. What it has told us, as both mayors have foreshadowed, is that we simply don't have—and no disrespect at all to our emergency service personnel, who risked their own lives while their own homes were flooded. But they need the resourcing and we need to look at a retained force there. Because of housing and other issues, we simply don't have the volunteer numbers. For example, there were three SES members in Mullumbimby who were available in the first 72 hours. If we think of the entire town and the landslips in the hills, that is catastrophic. There were deaths. To me, the first 72 hours—as well as the evacuation centres, you had the Mullum RSL, the Ocean Shores Country Club, the Cherry Street bowling club. All of those clubs became evacuation centres from the get-go, with huge impacts on them—hundreds of people and their dogs and cats and babies, people who were sick or elderly—and they still haven't been compensated for that.

All of the resilience groups were incredible, and Mullumbimby neighbourhood centre, but they simply aren't resourced. They don't have the mandate, they don't have the authority and they don't know that that's what's expected of them. In line with what Michael was talking about, to identify those community leaders and ensure that they have the training, the support and the resourcing to be stood up immediately—because the reality is that outsiders couldn't get in. For me, it's not a criticism of DCJ. Once the staff were here, they were unbelievably amazing. No matter what we look at now, in the recovery, the first 72 hours is crucial—including the Westpac helicopter, and that's a whole other thing you should look at. We spoke very strongly against it being moved to Lismore Airport specifically because of flooding, and that's what the paramedics were saying. Of course, it was completely flooded and they couldn't rescue anyone. I think they did one rescue, and how demoralising that was for them.

The other thing to flag is that we're now in week 13 or 14. You can't possibly expect the community—people who've lost their homes, who've been flood impacted—to wait this long to hear what is really on the table in terms of the reconstruction operation. I don't know why anyone has delayed doing a survey of everyone who's registered through Service NSW to find out what their needs are. David Witherdin said to me at the launch of the corporation that all options are on the table, but we know that's not true. There are not unlimited funds, so rip the bandaid off and tell us. For example, at South Golden Beach we've got people with multimillion-dollar properties. There's no way they're eligible for a land swap or a buyback. It's probably going to be a very small class of people who are eligible for some of those things, so let's identify that early. It should have been done weeks and weeks ago, and I'm very concerned that we're waiting till 1 July for this next entity to be stood up. Obviously I've got a lot to say; I've made 30 recommendations to the other inquiry. I am very happy to take questions.

**The CHAIR:** Ms Smith, would you mind providing a copy of that submission to our secretariat?

**Ms TAMARA SMITH:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** Councillor Lyon, in your opening statement you made reference to the evacuation centre being set up but not staffed. Can you go through what was the experience? Ms Smith, you mentioned the first 72 hours. What was the impact of not having the evacuation centre properly staffed or maintained? What happened in the community?

**MICHAEL LYON:** What happened was the SES issued an evacuation warning or issued an evacuation notice and told people that the evac centre was ready to go at the ex-services club in Mullumbimby, when it actually wasn't the case and the DCJ weren't there. In fact, I think it took a lot of advocacy by our council to get them there something like 48 hours after the event. It was quite a ways down the—

**Ms TAMARA SMITH:** It was a week, Michael. It was one week.

**MICHAEL LYON:** In terms of when the evacuation centre first—

**Ms TAMARA SMITH:** No, before DCJ staff could get in, it was one week.

**The CHAIR:** Sorry, Ms Smith, it was a week before State government staff were in the evacuation centre?

**Ms TAMARA SMITH:** Yes. They were unable to get into Mullumbimby, yes.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** The airport was closed.

**MICHAEL LYON:** Sorry, yes, there was access to Mullumbimby after a couple of days, but I don't know where the DCJ staff were. My understanding was that on the night or in the morning they were on the highway but made the call not to go in. I think there was an offer of a police boat or an escort of some sort, but

they declined that. I don't know the full details; I wasn't there. But I do understand they were in the vicinity but made the call not to come, and it was only after we made extensive advocacy that they actually finally stood that evacuation centre up, well down the line. I don't know the exact time, but they were also seeking to close it really quickly. In terms of the impact, you had this evacuation notice from the SES telling people to go there, so they rock up there and they're completely unprepared for the arrival of 300 people and pets and all of that. There were no real supplies in terms of enough blankets or towels or any of that sort of thing, and so the impact of that was that people just left.

**The CHAIR:** So what did people do?

**MICHAEL LYON:** They went back to their flood-affected properties. They felt it was a better option for them. Rather than being in that location, it was a better option for them to simply return home. After a while, once the roads were open, they were able to go over to Ocean Shores evacuation centre.

**The CHAIR:** Ms Cadwallader, you mentioned that you see mitigation as preparation for the next flood. We have to make recommendations to the Government on what we think is a way forward, and you highlighted mitigation as one of the recommendations that you wanted to see. Can you explore that for us, please?

**SHARON CADWALLADER:** Yes, absolutely. Most councils, I believe, have plans to mitigate against floods, but they don't have the resources to do it because of their budgets. It's usually very costly. I might ask our civil services director to expand on that, if you would, Mr Truman.

**JOHN TRUMAN:** I'm the Director of Civil Services at Ballina Shire Council. I also might add, in that role, I'm also the local emergency management officer as well. I had responsibilities for our council's coordination of the flood event as well as infrastructure planning matters. In response to Councillor Cadwallader's question, our experience is that our investment in infrastructure assets is typically around renewal. It's very difficult for a council to do more in terms of upgrading infrastructure. Our flood plain management plans do have a range of mitigation measures, which would have been essential to assist us in this latest event.

The mayor mentioned the isolation of Ballina as an example. We were three or four days completely isolated to the north and to the south and to the west. Evacuation routes out of Ballina are essential, and also for the resupply. That's why the evacuation centres struggled for external staff—because people physically couldn't come into the town. The evacuation centre—we've got evacuation routes planned. But the construction of that is multiple millions of dollars, as you'd expect, and there's no current funding source for that sort of infrastructure.

**The Hon. MARK BANASIAK:** Just one quick question to all of you: We obviously have heard from you now because of the good work of the SES and the ADF. But talking to some people yesterday, we got a mixed review of Resilience NSW and its engagement and involvement in this process. In fact, some of them actually said it was more of a hindrance to community-led recovery than it was a help. I want to get your views of Resilience NSW's role in this process and whether it was, in fact, a hindrance or if you feel otherwise.

**Ms TAMARA SMITH:** I'm happy to start. I think that it is very well-meaning—Gary McKinnon, when he was appointed as the regional recovery coordinator. But it's an entity that didn't have a budget, it's an entity that was not up to the task, and that's not a criticism of any member of the Resilience team. We saw there were lots of problems, and then we saw the appointment of Mal Lanyon as the regional recovery coordinator, and he has been outstanding. For my two bobs' worth, despite my political party, I can say that the police have been absolutely brilliant in the leadership roles that they've had. I will go further and suggest that the Resilience model that was there wasn't fit for purpose. I also have my concerns about the reconstruction corporation and whether it's any different. But certainly, from Mal Lanyon down, the recovery centres—my experience of touring them regularly is that they've been outstanding and the staff there have been outstanding. Everything above Mal, I have no comment on.

**The Hon. MARK BANASIAK:** Any other comments?

**SHARON CADWALLADER:** Yes. I would just say that there could have been—because of the newness of the role and I would agree, Tamara Smith, that when Mal Lanyon took over the role it certainly took the agency to a new level and things really started to fall into place. It was absolutely first class. The communication I had and whatever requests were coming through me—they were activated forthwith. I can't fault that. But I guess it's unclear what their role is. I think it's communication. Again, I think a lot of things we're talking about today come back to communications and being clear about what the role is. I think that's part of what could be done better. I don't know whether Mr Truman would like to add to that or not.

**JOHN TRUMAN:** From my perspective their support in helping us establish recovery centres has been excellent. The issue they face of course is, as a new agency—my observation is—getting cross cooperation still across the multitude of agencies that need to support recovery centres. I also think there's an issue around the fact

that they are—to their credit—encouraging community-led responses, but by doing so in fact it creates this level of confusion because some people are now unclear whether it's the councils leading the recovery or Resilience NSW. Now both obviously have a considered role but, in terms of actually making decisions, from time to time in my experience there's been lack of certainty around who's going to be making the right decision or who's got the decision-making.

I think as it's moved along—I appreciate that they've been trying to give autonomy to the councils, which is appreciated but, if the funding decisions are coming from someone else, ultimately it's better that they be making the broader decisions. I think that's where we're stating—that confusion. I do applaud their—there's a grant that's been issued to us and all the region's councils to appoint community recovery officers. I think that will be a significant investment for the future. The program that they've established to coordinate amongst those officers in terms of managing the learnings out of this event and how that might be planning—is an excellent program. So I would note that to the Committee.

**The CHAIR:** Ms Cadwallader, just one quick question before I pass to my colleague Cate Faehrmann. You mentioned that things improved with the appointment of Mal Lanyon. What steps or what approach did he take that improved things immediately? What happened?

**SHARON CADWALLADER:** For me it was the direct communication. The requests that I made were acted upon instantly. It wasn't something that was presented through the committee—and then to come back with a response. I think it was the process for me and the immediate responses.

**JOHN TRUMAN:** Sorry to interrupt, can I just add—one key decision that I found from Mr Lanyon was the creation of the operation centre. We had the SES managing their call centre and tasking a response during the response phase. But as we entered the recovery phase—there's so many community requests coming; there's so many different points of call. That became confusing around allocation of resources and prioritising. I mean, getting people—do we know whether they were hurt or not. Mr Lanyon with his team established a recovery operation centre, which was multi-agency, so all the requests could be centralised in one point. The councils and the community could all go to that point and then the work was tasked out to various agencies from there.

Now that central coordination took a little bit to set up because it hadn't been done before and there were issues around how people could contact via Service NSW. I'd make a suggestion to you that that model is an excellent way of bringing multi-agency response in that response phase. So learning how that was done on the run for future events so it's ready—because it did take some time to establish in the first instance, which is unnecessary now that we know how to do it. That was certainly—and I think that refers to Ms Smith's comments around police leadership. That was where their work was: in the response phase.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** I want to change course a little in the line of questioning. This is specifically around the levels of unmet mental health services or unmet demand for mental health services in your area. We've heard a lot from so many witnesses already—so many people we have spoken to just in the short 24 hours we've been here—about how much of an issue this is. I'm not too sure who to direct my question to, but I'm trying to get a sense of the scale of unmet demand and how much is being provided, particularly by NSW Health, in the area. I might go to you first, Tamara.

**Ms TAMARA SMITH:** Yes, what I'm being told by local psychologists is that all of the grants are a failure in the sense that, when you work through it, there's nothing in there for admin. It's just clinical hours. We already have a huge waiting list for psychs. So what it comes down to is about \$80 an hour for a clinician and your average psychologist gets \$150 an hour. With respect to the system and the grants that have been set up, we're hearing a lot of criticism of that.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** Can you explain what the grants that you're referring to are? When you're saying \$80, just talk through—

**Ms TAMARA SMITH:** Sorry, I don't have the name in front of me but I think there's been some initial mental health. Separate to what's gone to headspace and the Red Cross, practitioners can apply for programs around resilience and counselling. What they're saying to me is that when you drill down into those grants—so there hasn't been many in terms of mental health—there's nothing. You cannot use the money for administrative purposes. It ends up being only for clinician hours and basically the model is utterly flawed. Basically psychs won't take it up. They won't be able to get the practitioners to do the face to face. So we'll end up with probably more telehealth, which we know doesn't work, particularly in regional and rural areas. Then, possibly I guess, what they're saying is probationary psychs doing that work. So, yes, that's just one aspect. The other is what they're saying really needs to happen over two to three years, starting with extensive outreach—people aren't just going to go and sit in a room straight off the bat. Outreach for a period of time, group opportunities and then one on ones—because the predictions of PTSD are really very high in the community.



**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** I have just one further question maybe to the two mayors. Are there any recommendations from council in the mental health space with respect to your communities—services that aren't being provided that you think are necessary?

**SHARON CADWALLADER:** Absolutely. We don't have a headspace here in Ballina and there wouldn't be too many people that haven't either been directly or indirectly impacted by this event. It does affect everybody, whether it's somebody at school that's had a friend impacted—or who it is. I'm not saying this was directly part of this, but we had a youth suicide just last week here in Ballina shire and it was brought to my attention. We don't even have a headspace facility in our shire. The closest is Lismore. I would think that would be fundamental at a time like this: that we would actually get that service provided for us.

I also think that we need to have, as I said, ground-up support for mental health. Not everybody is going to go and pick up a phone to ring Lifeline or approach the Red Cross. There might be people knocking on doors, inviting them to a yoga class in a local community hall, where they can connect with people. Just that social connection can be the start of recovery. Or it might be a knitting class or something like that that might take place. I'd like to think that there was some funding available for door knockers to go out there and then meet with professionals in a group situation. I just think that's another way of reaching out at a time like this.

**MICHAEL LYON:** Can I just add to that? I have a friend who works at the hospital in Byron and she's saying they're chronically understaffed there. We don't have mental health services provided in our region either. I think they come down from Tweed to service our area. But she's saying it's chronically understaffed and this is where it comes back again to the housing issue. It's the same thing with rebuilding—when you're trying to talk about where you're going to put tradies and people like that when we go through this rebuilding phase when you have such a housing crisis. It's the same thing for council with our planning staff or our traffic staff.

Across the board, it is almost impossible to get staff because there's nowhere for them to live. That's the case in mental health as well. That mental health unit in the Byron hospital, they've had to close the older persons unit and merge two units together. They are massively understaffed. They advertise but they're not getting people applying. It has been a combination of factors. Housing is the critical one. The mandates as well have not helped in that sector. So it's chronically underfunded, is the message I'm getting.

**JOHN TRUMAN:** What's concerning to me is that the regional recovery committee has a range of subcommittees, and the subcommittee for health and wellbeing has only just been stood up. That group is the one that's responsible for the mental health strategy. So, to date, there's no mental health strategy from the Government under those committee arrangements. My biggest concern around that is that compared to some of the other spaces like animal and agriculture, environment, and infrastructure, where there are more obvious lead agencies—for example, Transport for NSW on the infrastructure side—with mental health and other aspects, there are so many players, so many non-government organisations and the like, and so many elements of health and other aspects.

So of all the subcommittees that needed, in my view, the broadest level of connection and communication to gather them and strategise and prioritise their resources, that's the one that's the most behind, which doesn't make sense to me. So that's concerning. I think what we're seeing because of that is there is a heap of work being done—a lot of mobile outreach and other work being done—but it's not being coordinated because there is not a strategy. Under the current arrangements, the recovery committee is meant to stand up. The subcommittee has only just done it. I think that's unfortunate and disappointing.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Thank you for your ongoing work. It's going to be a long haul. I have two questions. The first one is to you maybe, Mr Truman, and to you, Councillor Cadwallader. You talked about having a mitigation plan but not having the resources to do it. Are you able to quantify how much money you'd need to spend to fulfil your mitigation plan?

**JOHN TRUMAN:** It's a big book, I'll be frank. For example, we've got Fishery Creek Bridge here, which is just adjacent to the club. There's an estimated \$25 million expenditure there to provide dual lanes so that we can have access out of Ballina Island to the south in that direction. That's just one project alone. We've got overland flood study work done on Ballina Island, and we are talking about \$10 million worth of work just for the high-priority drainage infrastructure. We're talking \$100 million more. So it is substantial investment. The point we're trying to raise, though, is there's this huge amount of infrastructure spend that's going to come through this response phase, and the shift of focus towards mitigation funding is essential.

Even though the number is so big—sorry to be vague in terms of that response, because we've got the details of that across a whole range of assets—the thing that concerns the council, which came forward at the council meeting last week, is it's great to have the planning but the community loses confidence when they know that the implementation that follows will be fairly non-existent. A lot of the floodplain planning we do is funded with government support but then there is no connection next to the infrastructure delivery that should follow.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** So do you think, with the new commission that's coming forward, a key recommendation is that they need to knit all of the grants programs together in the rebuild? Is that the big opportunity here?

**JOHN TRUMAN:** I'm on the advisory group that's helping the infrastructure office within the corporation. The focus of our work to date has been understanding the scale of the recovery response in terms of rebuild, and there is procurement necessary to do that in a coordinated way. Because at the moment there's not the capability within the region, resource wise, to build what's going to be needed to be built over the next three or four years. So the focus has been more around the coordination of the contract, the procurement, the resourcing and the prioritisation of how that's even going to be done. But that is all response money. There's a little bit of betterment money—and Councillor Lyon touched on that—and that's welcome. The couple of packages that have been announced so far are going to be competitive, which is going to be difficult, unfortunately.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** So will they make you all put in different grant applications and you'll see who comes out at the end, rather than being able to get together and make a priority list? Do you think that's possible?

**JOHN TRUMAN:** We're still waiting on the detail of that. For example, there's the \$312 million that the roads Minister announced not so long ago. That is a betterment package. Up to 60 per cent of that has been allocated to local government roads and potentially up to 40 per cent to State roads. But, again, we are understanding that stage one, at least, will be competitive. That's not unreasonable in the sense that we want to make sure that the money is allocated to the highest-priority projects. But it does mean that it will slow the process down, and so we're suggesting that it might need to be twofold. There might be some lower-hanging fruit identified quickly and readily, and then a program designed to assess the higher-priority projects after that. But I think the whole nature of a competitive grant process is going to make things a lot slower and potentially determine where those funds go.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** We've heard about the incredible community effort that has gone into filling the gaps—being there when there is no government agency—and working with agencies when they are there. You would be very familiar with this. Yesterday we were down at Wardell CORE, seeing some of the work that they're doing there. How can government better support that community-led work outside of the structures of council? Such incredible work has been done. Based on what you've seen, I'm wondering how we can make that easier. Everyone is kind of good. But now, three months in, people are tired, the money is running out, and people need to return to their lives and fix up their own homes. I'm interested in your perspectives about how government can better facilitate that community support outside of local government.

**MICHAEL LYON:** The first thing I would say is that there has been an effort from Resilience NSW prior to the floods to do this, in terms of funding. Resilient Byron and, I think, Resilient Lismore are funded through the Government to begin this process of planning for the future, and being resilient and adaptive as communities. So, as a starting point, I would look at that and see how well that has gone, or not. But I think it's clear, through the comments earlier about how we can—certainly for disasters—plan inside the community and make sure we have those leaders who can step up. I would definitely accelerate that effort. Obviously, seeing how it's gone—in terms of what programs they've already begun, how well that went and how well those groups went during the recent events—is probably the starting point.

**Ms TAMARA SMITH:** Why do you think the grants model works at all for this? After Cyclone Tracy every single suburb, particularly near Darwin, meets monthly, and it's all about cyclone preparedness. Considering how cut off everybody gets—that village model—we can't just throw out a few grants. The State Government needs to recognise those leaders and resource, empower and train them. It shouldn't be left to others.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** I'd like to ask about the health of the Richmond River. We are now three months since the flood. Obviously, the water that went through Lismore went through all the river towns. It was at its most contaminated and full of debris by the time it got to Ballina. A lot of industry and recreation depends on that river. It is very important. Could you comment on the health of the river, the beaches and waterways generally three months after the flood event? Is there any plan to clean it up?

**SHARON CADWALLADER:** We are getting seriously impacted here—our tourism industry. Everybody would have seen the river today as you walked by it. It's in a serious way, with lots of debris still washing down. Of course, the sewage is still being pumped out of Lismore. Everything ends up in Ballina because of their sewerage plant failing during the events. I believe it will take six years for that plant to be rebuilt, but improvements are being made with the quality of the sewerage being pumped into the ring system. That is my understanding. But we still cannot tell our communities and our visitors it's safe to swim in our waterways. So it is impacting us. Our water quality is in a terrible situation. So it is affecting us in more ways than one. Mr Truman might like to comment further.

**JOHN TRUMAN:** Ms Cusack, I might just add that, previously in events, beach clean-up and debris clean-up hasn't been claimable for us under the national disaster relief arrangements. Thankfully, this time, to their credit, the EPA have been actually coordinating that work. We haven't been doing it. That's helped us enormously. The actual debris clean-up is something that has, in my experience from this event, been significantly better than previously. I think the natural disaster arrangements don't satisfactorily accommodate the point that the mayor is making in respect of the impacts of tourism and others, because it's not direct damage to infrastructure—none of that work's covered—even though it's response-and-recovery work.

In general terms, there's a real gap in those funding arrangements around the restoration of riverbank erosion, which, obviously, also makes significant impact onto the water quality. Again it falls in between jurisdictions. The council tends to invest in rock and other revetment works to protect road assets. But, because the river is not ours, we're not doing other works. Certainly, the soil and sediment issues associated with erosion are outside of the current arrangements. I think that needs to be reviewed.

**Ms TAMARA SMITH:** We need a whole inquiry into the Richmond River. The de-rating—this is legacy. It's going on and on and on. We haven't even talked about the drains in the flood plain. But it's in dire need. That's a necessary conversation.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** I know that we are going to receive evidence on this. Some people will be saying that we need to dredge the mouth of the river. I wondered if you had any comment on that.

**JOHN TRUMAN:** Certainly the council has long advocated for the dredging of the river, particularly from an economic point of view, in terms of access and safety. We need to consider, in this flood event, that our experience was that the height that we predicted from our modelling in the nights immediately after the rain was a flood impact probably 600 or 700 millimetres higher than what actually came through. The main reason we think that happened was because of river scouring. There's no doubt that the dredging of the river would assist in releasing the water faster and keeping the water lower. I caution, though. That needs to be considered against—our other flood risk, of course, is from the ocean surge flooding. The dredging then could allow more water back in on the corresponding phase. There's a balance there. But certainly the council and the community here have long advocated for dredging for the purposes of helping flood mitigation.

**Ms TAMARA SMITH:** We need to be looking at supercharged weather events and climate modelling to be able to look at any of that because we could see unintended consequences as a result of dredging. It just needs to be modelled over much bigger analysis of the river and the impacts of the river's poor health, I think.

**The CHAIR:** I don't think anyone took any questions on notice. But you gave a commitment to submit—

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** I do apologise, Mr Chair. I think Councillor Cadwallader was reading from a submission. But I think that was a submission made to the Government, not to our Committee. I wanted to suggest that—

**The CHAIR:** Yes. Could you, in fact, give a copy of your submission to our inquiry to—

**SHARON CADWALLADER:** Certainly.

**Ms TAMARA SMITH:** Do we just send it to that "flood@"?

**The CHAIR:** Yes. That'll be fine.

**Ms TAMARA SMITH:** But does that go to everyone? Or does that go to the secretariat?

**The Hon. MARK BANASIAK:** It goes to the secretariat. Then it'll be distributed to us.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Also, the presentation we had at Byron Council this morning—if a copy of that could be tabled, part of our inquiry, that would be really helpful.

**MICHAEL LYON:** No problem.

**The CHAIR:** There are three things, then: MP Smith's, Councillor Cadwallader's and the presentation from Byron Council. Thank you for your time.

**(The witnesses withdrew.)**

**(Short adjournment)**

**Ms REBECCA WOODS**, Chief Executive Officer, Bogal Local Aboriginal Land Council; Chief Financial Officer, Bandjalang Aboriginal Corporation PBC RNTBC, affirmed and examined

**Ms ARABELLA DOUGLAS**, Chief Executive Officer, Currie Country Group, affirmed and examined

**The CHAIR:** If you wish to make a short opening statement, you may do so.

**ARABELLA DOUGLAS:** I might start, actually, on behalf of Rebecca and I. First we'd like to acknowledge the traditional owners. We are traditional owners of this land. I am a Bundjalung woman, as I've indicated. It's with great pleasure that we're here and talking about Aboriginal communities and the Bundjalung nation. A lot of the evidence that we'll be giving today is a coordinated effort on behalf of the First Nations people affected by the floods in the Northern Rivers. As I speak more broadly about the Bundjalung nation, I want you to be conscious that it is inclusive of Richmond Valley Council, Byron Local Council, Ballina Local Council, Lismore Local Council and Tweed Local Council and elements of Kyogle in terms of systems and infrastructure impact. We are both Aboriginal women.

Since the flood, Currie Country Social Change, which is a not-for-profit and a think tank in terms of doing some work in disaster and recovery, has been supporting and coordinating efforts with Bogal Local Aboriginal Lands Council, the native title holders and, in particular, Cabbage Tree and Jali Local Aboriginal Lands Council. I should also say for the purposes of this inquiry I used to be the director of statewide services for Aboriginal Housing Office, 10 years ago, so I've led floods in the area. I understand the way that government operates. I am still a Housing Appeals Committee member for justice New South Wales. I also sit on Crown board. So I don't come here inexperienced in what's actually occurring in the environment. But, for the purpose of these hearings today, Currie Country has assisted in making sure that the Indigenous communities that were heavily affected, including my own—I'm from Fingal Head.

The communities impacted there heavily were Fingal Head and Chinderah, which is an area near the Tweed River. We have, since the floods, decided to come as a group together to talk, in all of the spaces that have been made available to us, about both ensuring that housing and homelessness is dealt with as a matter of urgency, impact on Aboriginal communities' culture and heritage is considered and thought about, and to bring ourselves up to speed as to how we're in this space in a river area and Aboriginal science has not yet been integrated into data mapping in the flooding area, in the flooding zones. Currie Country Social Change is a not-for-profit, as I've indicated. We are assisting the communities in galvanising that thinking and that attention on behalf of the region, while people are also concerned with housing, homelessness, displacement. I'll get Rebecca to speak about Bogal and their impacts on Coraki. But I should start first with my own, which is in the Tweed region.

We were heavily impacted by floods. We didn't have great emergency response locally, on the ground. That happened for a period of time. Community were out, saving and assisting and helping. We are a very big fishing community, so a lot of people own boats. They were out, doing what you would ordinarily see rescue or support services undertaking in the Fingal and Chinderah and Tweed area. That was diabolical and difficult and stressful for a number of days. But my own observation—having been experienced in an agency that removed towns in 2010 and 2011, I did not see any coordinated effort from government on the ground at all for the first seven days. Then the Federal Government decided to turn up. It was as a marketing opportunity, while there were people still assisting each other. We went then into a mode of getting elderly people out of all of the demountable homes and caravan parks that exist in the Chinderah area.

We're a very old population. People were, including my husband and other people—I don't know if Letitia has made it, but they were evacuated—really just doing the best that we could on the limited resources we had. There was not a police presence; there was not an emergency presence. People were just doing the best they could. At about day seven I started to get particularly worried because the things that I would ordinarily see, for example—although the internet was out, but you would ordinarily see the State asking for people who come from areas of government who have dealt with emergency responding to make themselves available to assist. I have witnessed that inside government. None of that happened. The Northern Rivers is an amazing place. There are amazingly talented senior ex-government and government people all through the region.

We were discussing the fact that at no point, even though people were on the ground and there were people being asked to assist and help coordinate—we could see that coordination was not occurring. That drew terror in me and I was very concerned. I have biological family who are connected to Cabbage Tree, so I was hearing that people were evacuated under stress. As I have said, I sit as a Housing Appeals Committee member, so I am very conscious of housing and homelessness as an issue as well. I was understanding what was occurring in terms of urgent relocations. I have handled that myself. There was absolutely no government coordination occurring on the ground for the first 12 days in any systematic way that you would imagine. Currie Country also owns a native food farm in Burringbar. We are part of the food community in the region. We were already

responding with food, supplies and water. We were still evacuating, cleaning mud, helping people to relocate and find accommodation using every effort that we could, thinking that you are going to sustain this for some period of time and somebody else will show up.

Defence was in the area. They were not, obviously, instructed to engage at that point. People were making observations that they were around. I am very familiar with how the Federal Government needs to set a trigger in order that the State may operate and use some of its other resources. It did not happen, and that was apparent. It was disarming and quite frightening to think that we were waiting for a marketing opportunity from the Federal Government before there were letters of exchange to support between both the State and Federal Government. It was really scary with a lot of elderly people, a lot of young people and no ability to be able to communicate and get between areas because of the systems failure in the region. We are in a region that is looking at removing its railway at a time when that is the biggest corridor to support systems infrastructure. We had roads collapsed all through the region. People were cut off.

In the food space, we were assisting with helicoptering in food to people who could not get any food and water. That is not okay. We are not in Bolivia. That is not okay. We are not a Third World country, although we have Third World elements and thinking going on in the Northern Rivers. That startled me, concerned me. As a not-for-profit, we decided to come down and assist the communities that were already in dire need, both in Cabbage Tree and in Coraki. I mentioned to the Mayor of Ballina, and I don't want it to sound like I am trying to insult her, but she is yet to visit Cabbage Tree—the mayor who was giving evidence. What you have before you is a layer of communication to the inquiry about some interest, but there is a lack of integrated voice in the community as a whole. I am not trying to embarrass the mayor; I asked her simply why she hasn't still been there. Even if she is fragile or precious or whatever is going on in her mind, that is not okay. We are 12 weeks in. This is with Coraki and Cabbage Tree. They haven't had visits from their mayors in their local area.

We had 200 people removed from Cabbage Tree urgently, and the mayor of the local town hasn't yet been there to see them. Prince William has been on a Zoom with them. I say this to put in your mind—not to startle you, but to make you understand that there is tandem thinking and responses going on. We got behind Kristi Lee—she is a very impressive, vibrant young leader of the community—and Rebecca, who is outstanding, to make sure their voices were not just part of the din, to make sure that housing for Aboriginal people was on the top of the agenda and to make sure that their relocation was important. But it shouldn't require that. It should be easy for a State government—and I am very conscious of the State Government then pulling away from the Federal Government, making sure that their personality seemed distinctly different. I appreciate the Premier came up. State Cabinet certainly got their act together in terms of responding, but only through pressure, not through planning.

Now, before I hand over to Rebecca I just want to say a couple of things about the framing of this. I heard a question from the inquiry about how much it costs to do all of this mitigation planning. I am aware that all of the local councils had put in mitigation plans to the State more than two years ago. In 2020 they were submitting mitigation plans—all of the local councils. The volume and the number around that was about \$150 million. The scoping work that people were asking for was about \$3 million. Janelle Saffin is on the record inside Parliament requesting that on behalf of all of the local councils. I am not pro her or against her, but it is infuriating to know that all of the local councils—for their deficiencies about particular local engagement—had wanted funding for mitigation plans and that hadn't occurred.

**The CHAIR:** We will hear from Ms Woods and then we will ask you a few questions.

**REBECCA WOODS:** What I would like to lead off with is that I am an Aboriginal woman. I am a Quandamooka woman from Stradbroke Island. In my present position, I am working in Coraki for the Bogal Local Aboriginal Land Council. I want to acknowledge up-front that the assistance that we probably needed from the representatives at a local, State and Federal level never came to Coraki to assist us. We ended up getting the results that we did through the sheer determination and persistence of people like Arabella Douglas and her not-for-profit, Currie Country. They were able to map out a clear plan for us and try and assist us to, basically, make our own outcomes for ourselves. It is not really her job. I mean, we are in an LGA, we are part of a State and we are part of a Federal nation. I just wanted to say from the outset that, basically, the response we got in Coraki was not adequate. We were lucky to meet Arabella, and through her experience and contacts she was able to help us map out a plan to move forward.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** My first question is where are the 200 people from Cabbage Tree, and what is the plan? What support are you getting to develop a plan?

**ARABELLA DOUGLAS:** I have to say, Chris Binge was doing a great job moving and evacuating people. I really do hope that you get a chance to talk to him about the experience of the evacuation, which is quite phenomenal in and of itself. People then moved into, effectively, what would be State response housing, so

apartments, hotels et cetera. We then had to push up and get direct relationships with Ministers responsible for various roles, including Steph Cooke. We spoke to her office and used Cabinet members personally. That is obviously not what you would ordinarily do, but there was a lack of knowing who was running what and who needed to be aware of what for the first phase. We decided on a plan. We used all of our Sydney contacts and our relationships with various Ministers. We were able to get the Premier onto the island. We had a plan about what we were going to ask for, and funding. We took to task an opportunity to get the Governor-General and Prince William, and we used all the powers that we possibly had to make sure that Aboriginal housing was prioritised and made sure that it was accounted for.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Are you seeing the follow-through that you need?

**ARABELLA DOUGLAS:** We are because then we worked with Minderoo as well, who I knew were advisers for the State. We talked about pods. I have great relationships from different mining sectors, and Western Australia, and, of course, we've got Aboriginal community projects all the way through Queensland. What's great, being Aboriginal, is that you have a variety of networks that you can work on. We had at our availability other camps that were being closed down that we could use stock. We were looking at that as an option. So we were problem-solving and pulling up to the Government's solutions, and briefing with our solutions, because there was no-one thinking through that. I offered that to my own local council—Tweed local council.

I offered it to other groups that I knew were also struggling with getting assets and supply, which is a big issue at the moment. So it certainly wasn't as though we were just only focused on Aboriginal people. We just knew that—the Prime Minister himself came and said, "It's up to the community to do." Once we heard that, we thought, "Fine, we'll do it." We started planning and working out what our communities needed and started using all of our networks nationally and globally to work out plans for pods. We were able to get the pods. Mal then came on board, and I agree he seems efficient. But he is still beholden to the Minister. Obviously, there is a National Party, a Liberal Party—there is a relationship and a tension there. That has to be worked through, about who wants to be doing what. But, for the community, it was to make sure that we were both housed, prioritised, moved across. They had the temporary accommodation—we were looking at Lake Ainsworth at the beginning—that they're now building and they're moving people into.

So our issue for the State is—and the State is very aware of this, and I have briefed Ministers on this last week at Macquarie Street, and the Opposition Minister. People are very aware at a State level that the accommodation made available for Cabbage Tree and other people, temporarily, is exactly that. It is temporary accommodation. It is only suitable, and they've been advised of this, for potentially 12 or 18 months. The problem with that, of course, is we're running up to an election at the beginning of next year, and you need to see commitment for rebuild. There are over 4,000 homes in the area that drastically need labour, people on the ground to be able to do the work. The insurance matters are not yet resolved. And you have some temporary stock, which people will be very glad to be in, but it cannot house them and educate them. We've had, like the gentleman who spoke before—Jali has had three adult suicide attempts. There is tremendous mental stress, social stress upon people. Education has been disrupted. I think, Rebecca, you were saying, your internet and electricity and stuff was like—was it two weeks ago?

**REBECCA WOODS:** Two weeks ago, restored to us.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** There is so much to ask.

**ARABELLA DOUGLAS:** So much.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** I have one more question; it is sort of two sides of the same coin. What didn't we know, and what didn't you think the community knew, that needs to be included, in the future, if this was to happen again?

**ARABELLA DOUGLAS:** I think what they didn't know is the mapping for ancient knowledge that informs BOM. The problem is BOM didn't work. There are two parts to this and, again, I come from the experience of having flood recovery myself. There are two parts. One is that, currently, we have a volunteer fire force that works around the environment. When fire happens, people run and get on their stuff and they go help. There is not that in the structure of communities at the moment. There's not a flood response community-led group that goes and puts on overalls. That's one. So I imagine that Mary O'Kane's inquiry will probably recommend something like that. That needs to be funded; it can't be voluntary. It needs to be professionalised. It needs to be Aboriginal led in a lot of ways, particularly in the river systems. There needs to be more information and data.

What I'm saying is not new. Again, I refer to your—I think it's called the Sendai report, which is your overarching framework between Federal Government and State Government. Those strategies, one of them specifically says that you need to have more data fed into prediction, including Aboriginal sciences and information. That was created by the Government in 2019. That's a strategy. The question is why aren't you asking

those people who had a responsibility to roll out that strategy from 2019 to 2023—why is it that you haven't focused on those strategies? We want to, and we're going to put in a proposal to map this area with Aboriginal knowledge systems and science and archaeological evidence as well.

Ballina is "Bullinah", which means "belly swell". If Chris was here, he would tell you the story. We all come from three brothers here. He is from one; I am an ancestor from another. I am a Minyangbal woman. Bullinah means belly swell. So you might be thinking, "What does that mean?" It means this is not actually unusual. I know you think it's a crisis, and it's all about climate. Particularly it is, in one way—in a shorthand view of it. But there have been large river swells like this in this area. You need to—and your good people have done it in the report. You need to get better data to feed prediction in a way that actually makes sense. More information is better information. So we are very keen, as the Bundjalung nation, to do that mapping. We are putting in a proposal to do the mapping. Even if the Government doesn't want to do it, we're quite confident that the community, our local councils, will be open to listening to those predictions. That's going to help with some decisions like should you rebuild areas or not.

So that was already suggested by government. You said, "Let's go out and ask Aboriginal and First Nations people what they know," and no-one did it. We have decided, as the groups in here—the 13 clans—that we're going to do it anyway, because we're not going to wait for governments to decide to do it. We have to do it for our own planning and so that we do have river systems here again. I mean, it's not just that you need dredging—that's not the answer. The answer is we need to think about how we might operate communities differently, how we might pivot them differently. We are working on plans to keep temporary housing stock in the region so that we can pivot in a crisis. We now understand what that's going to look like. Another question?

**The CHAIR:** No, I will—

**ARABELLA DOUGLAS:** Sorry, I'm very passionate about it, because it's a lot. We've had a long 12 weeks.

**The CHAIR:** Ms Douglas, I'm mindful that my colleagues want to ask questions.

**ARABELLA DOUGLAS:** For sure.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** I really want to thank you for your passionate presentation. I live at Lennox Head, and you captured the fear and the panic, I think, particularly when we were told everyone in the Northern Rivers needs to evacuate. It scared the hell out of me—do these people have any idea what's coming? I was actually in the Richmond room when Cabbo came up. The island needs an evacuation plan, clearly, and they need a place to go. I just wondered if you wouldn't mind giving evidence to that effect—that it's not the first time they have had to be evacuated. And I was very surprised. In terms of the importance of keeping community together, the Elders being at the Ramada and others being sprinkled all over the place—if you could, in terms of evacuation of a whole community, speak to that. To the importance of keeping people—

**ARABELLA DOUGLAS:** I think you should ask Chris that as well, but I will give you my version. Of course, ask him again as well. In terms of the community, they have Elders buried on the island. So it's got a bottleneck and a very dangerous way in and out of the island—that's going to be addressed. I know the EPA report for Cabbage has come back. But there are also—Jali Local Aboriginal Land Council are the largest landowner in Ballina LGA, so they had other options of land. They are unfortunately surrounded by cane fields, which means drainage and matters like that also affect how water is retained in the area. But the evacuation plan really needs to be about where they see themselves in the future, and whether or not they keep the space as a community space, not necessarily housing all of the people back there again, and to look at aged housing for other Elders, and think about their other landholdings. They're not insisting on being right, just to maintain something. They're actually more interested in looking at how they can stabilise their community, and that may look a bit different in the rebuild.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Is that conversation underway at the moment?

**ARABELLA DOUGLAS:** It is. Obviously, Chris has got the EPA reports back, I think which is what they were waiting for. Insurance, as you would also have, as well—insurance for local aboriginal land councils is an unresolved issue. There's great impact there, whether it's insurable or not. I understand there is large-scale class action litigation being talked about, potentially to push the Government to underwrite insurance like we've seen in other areas of the world. But those are the issues that will inform how they rebuild and what they do going back there. At the moment it's extremely dangerous, for the types of water that was coming down. Chris ended up commandeering a helicopter. He ended up putting people on his shoulder—waist high. There is a really super, super narrow bridge. That's why I asked the mayor had she been out there. It's not that I want her to be shocked into doing something because she's seeing, "Wow, I'm in a black space." But it's to see that people are having to

live in conditions, and narrow conditions—like a narrow bridge—or safety conditions, that need everyone to be concerned about it.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Just focusing back on the evacuation, though, the idea of keeping the community together and also the school, if you could just—

**ARABELLA DOUGLAS:** The school out there—and there's also a medical centre there. I know that they also want to rebuild. At the moment, the plan is that where they've set up at Wardell, the school is going to make a temporary type of school there and start servicing the kids as people come back, and also start to do some health support, mental health support et cetera. But if that remains a school, which would be great—people go in for the day, they take their kids there and they have a lot of community space—it may lessen the danger of having people residing there permanently and they may choose a different sort of mix. But that's a matter for the community and the members to decide, and I know that they're thinking through all of those things.

But at the moment most of the members and the decision-makers—which is why also I'm here—are in crisis. It's their homes that have been impacted. Decision fatigue at the moment is a real thing for everybody here. All the people that are actually affected by housing are also leading not-for-profits or small organisations and are decision-makers in school and how we do these other things. They're strapped in their mind because they're worried about where they're going to live. At the moment they're still going hotel to hotel or are just about to relocate into something. It's very challenging.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** There are so many questions, but can I just ask: Do you have an estimate of how many First Nations people were impacted by the flood?

**ARABELLA DOUGLAS:** Yes, we do actually. We have got the numbers from Coraki—you're at about 90, is that right, Ms Woods?—about 92, maybe 100 from Coraki. We've got about 300 from Cabbage Tree. We've got about 150 from Lismore to Tweed. They're the people who I would say are displaced and impacted. Then you have people that sit outside that rim who are impacted either by infrastructure, system impact. They can't get to work. I think there were 26 cars that went underwater in Cabbage Tree, for example. That impacted people's ability to get to work. If you haven't noticed, the car market is extreme—second-hand car market and first car purchasing. There is a desperate need for just cars to help people get back to work, and work isn't just local. I haven't even seen anyone talking about that. That's throughout Lismore and throughout Tweed. Up near the hills, Bilambil and areas like that, a lot of cars were taken off, or people had a very cheap car that got flood damage and couldn't repair it, and there is no repairing mechanism, or it's too expensive to repair.

**REBECCA WOODS:** Or they weren't insured.

**ARABELLA DOUGLAS:** Or it wasn't insured, yes. That's a major issue as well. I wouldn't just say that is for Indigenous people; I would say for people in the region that would be a major issue.

**Ms SUE HIGGINSON:** I wanted to ask about the river and its health—what your communities and the people you're speaking to think about the health of the river.

**ARABELLA DOUGLAS:** Did you want to comment on that, sis, first?

**REBECCA WOODS:** One of the things that I do actually want to say is that as the CFO of Bandjalang, the native title holders, one of the things that happens is obviously that the damage from the floods has quite possibly exposed areas of great cultural significance. From a native title holder perspective, there really hasn't been this assessment of the extent of the damage to our cultural landscape. I'm heading up the organisation and no-one's even had a conversation with me about how the floods have impacted our landscape. There's been no initial conversation about how the floods impacted it. There's been no assessment or suggestion of assessment of how it has affected our cultural landscape.

There's been no plan, obviously, because you need steps one and two to get to step three, which is mapping out a plan and moving forward about how you might protect and preserve what was already there or what may have already been exposed. The rivers are under strain anyway. I don't know if you know much about Aboriginal culture but our forefathers before us in time immemorial managed the land without such events. The reason it is and was that way is because we knew it well. We knew its intrinsic value and we have a tremendous amount of respect for our country. We don't own it; we belong to it. I think that the wider community has a lot to learn about these values that form our culture, the way that we see land and the way that we manage our land.

**Ms SUE HIGGINSON:** Can I just ask a follow-up on that, if it's not inappropriate—and if it is, just say: From where you sit now, would you say that the damage is significant culturally?

**ARABELLA DOUGLAS:** Yes.

**REBECCA WOODS:** Yes.



**ARABELLA DOUGLAS:** I just want to add about that, obviously our sustenance is freshwater and saltwater, predominantly saltwater people. At the moment the saltwater systems are just abysmal, in terms of yugari or pipis, in terms of what's available to eat at the moment. It's very difficult. There's great impact in the river systems and I haven't seen large-scale work around that about what the recovery is for that. Oysters and oyster systems have been badly affected. Pipis and pipi systems have been badly affected. You can tolerate lots of freshwater into your river. What you can't tolerate is all the chemicals that run off from farms in the fresh river into the system.

But there has been no large-scale work. No-one has engaged with Aboriginal people about—you're talking about cultural value. If you imagine that this happened in Egypt, the first thing the government would do there would be a cultural assessment and heritage impact statement that talks about its great value, its world value. We're in a world-class area here and we've had no-one come and do large-scale World Heritage mapping on the impact. We have caves in our area with Aboriginal art. We have songlines. We have great art all through this area that maybe non-Indigenous people still don't know about—and that's okay, but it still needs preserving. It still needs protecting and nobody is doing that work. There are only four native title determinations in the State of New South Wales, so the list is not long. They would be the most critically impacted and nobody has come to speak to them.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** You touched on it before about the lack of cars now meaning it's difficult to get to work. Industry has taken a massive hit across the area. Looking forward, what has that meant for job opportunities for these Indigenous communities and how do we minimise that impact not just now but six, twelve months, two years hence?

**ARABELLA DOUGLAS:** I implore you all to stop the destruction of the railway as number one. It's an urgent piece of infrastructure and a corridor for both supply and people that needs to remain in the area. The supply chain for cars is a longer part of the conversation, and you actually don't control the global markets, but you do control the corridors of rail. Please let it remain. There's an idea at the moment about a bike track and for some reason they happen to pull up rails at the same time. You don't need to do that. That would alleviate and help the communities grow and get some traction on moving at the moment.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** That's to access, too.

**ARABELLA DOUGLAS:** That's the access to and from work. That corridor is still great and it's valid. But the other thing, of course, as Rebecca has suggested, is that the floods could have revealed great cultural impact across those corridors. No-one's even come to say, "There's a large piece of infrastructure going on. Huge flood—let's reassess it for cultural and heritage value." We would be asking for that. That needs to happen. That's the sort of mindfulness that needs to happen when you consider Aboriginal need and heritage in these sorts of zones. I think, in terms of an economic plan, Jali presented to Cabinet last week a labour plan about getting some labour support in the area for both their urgent build and build in the area. It's gone up and been circulated to every Minister as well as Opposition. It basically looks like a mobile workforce of 1,000 or 1,500 people—

**The CHAIR:** Ms Douglas—

**ARABELLA DOUGLAS:** You're asking me to hurry, are you?

**The CHAIR:** No, I was going to ask if you could supply a copy of that submission to the—

**ARABELLA DOUGLAS:** I will. I'm happy to provide—basically, just to the exciting bits, so you understand it: Minderoo have offered to do workers' camps in the area. In order to attract labour and keep people in the area so that everyone can get their houses fixed, you need to meet the gap between the FIFO market and the common market. We're asking Government to consider an incentive so that we can actually attract the people to remain here for a period of time and have a nimble workforce that can actually rebuild the 4,000 homes in two years. We spoke to the Minister for Treasury, the Minister for Planning and every Minister we took a meeting with. We briefed the Opposition. It's a great plan. It's a great labour plan and it serves the area—I'm very happy to share that with you—to be driven by Jali Local Aboriginal Land Council. They're heavily impacted. They have a couple of—what would you call them?—kind of project manage-and-build teams underneath them and obviously the priority is to build local and regional jobs at the same time. So there is a plan and we've thought of a plan as well. So we're not just asking for housing. We're asking for security of housing and a plan to deliver, and we've had to work intimately directly with government to get some traction on it. That shouldn't be the way a region would ordinarily operate.

**REBECCA WOODS:** Through the Chair, can I say something?

**The CHAIR:** Yes.

**REBECCA WOODS:** I want to talk about the experiences through the flood for Coraki, in particular. Coraki is a small town 20 kilometres out of Lismore. It's on the neck of the Richmond River and the Wilsons River, so it deals with large volumes of water. Our little town was basically left stranded for five days. Like, it was just local people. I think our little SES crew is probably two volunteers, so it was just local people banding together, but we saw a lot of that during the floods. There's three Aboriginal organisations in town. I head up two of them. I've just taken the third one under my wing because we're seen as the one that has most capacity. Kurrachee is an independent housing cooperative in Coraki, but they just don't have the capacity to deal with the after-effects of the flood.

Bogal Land Council is in a small building in the middle of the mission. They call it Box Ridge. Box Ridge wasn't directly impacted by the floods but it sort of became an island, so access into town to get supplies and things like that were impacted. Eventually the SES flight came. You know, we get it; lots of people in need all at one time. But one of the things that started to happen is people started saying, "Oh, Bogal wasn't impacted by the flood." But we're a small town. There's three Aboriginal organisations and I'm basically the most capable. So my workload has blown up like you wouldn't believe because there are lots of people in need, particularly the people that were in the Kurrachee houses. They weren't insured. There's like—Arabella mentioned the number—just over 90.

We're coming into winter. With Kurri Country's assistance we were able to secure some pods, but what it really points to is the wider national crisis around housing. They've never done Aboriginal housing well. We kind of get the cookie-cutter model and, you know, "That's what you're getting." There's no consultation about whether it's fit for purpose. Our demographics, like in those teen years, they are growing exponentially and we need to be able to plan for these things adequately. We've been doing it for years and years, and we haven't been doing it very well. I just feel as though this flood crisis has really shone a spotlight on it. I get it. I said it to Arabella—it's a scale thing. Lismore's a big regional centre. Jali, you know, the island, got wiped out but in the three Aboriginal organisations, 90 people have been impacted. You know, 90 per cent of Coraki was impacted. We've got houses where people are living 20 in a three-bedroom house.

We had an early meeting. Mal Lanyon came and representatives from NIAA came—the National Indigenous Australians Agency. We had representatives from Aboriginal Affairs. They were basically saying the same thing to us, you know, "Here are the hotlines." But what it doesn't account for is the sliding scale in ability, particularly for Aboriginal people. I mean, you've got everything from illiterate to highly educated. What we've found is that the more educated people have that additional stress. I like that term that Arabella used, decision fatigue. Like, I'm just so tired because my workload has blown up exponentially and there's really been no attention to increasing the resources to me to assist.

We're coming into winter. People are still living in tents on their footpaths. DCJ is offering them houses, but what they don't understand about Aboriginal people is that they are solidly connected to country and their family are their support network. To suggest that they maybe move up to a space on the Gold Coast so they're housed—they don't understand that it is a holistic thing. We function as a group, so if you take one piece out of the group it sort of falls down. So in terms of everybody being impacted, the one-size-fits-all model really doesn't speak to the solution for Aboriginal people. We were fortunate that we ended up working with Arabella and Kurri Country because they really got our perspective. You know, they were just like, "We're here. How can we help?" That's really been the greatest assistance that we have had during the whole thing.

**The CHAIR:** Ms Woods, can I end on one question? The example you provided of 20 people living in a three-bedroom house, what is that like?

**REBECCA WOODS:** Stressful.

**The CHAIR:** What are the circumstances? What is the situation?

**REBECCA WOODS:** These are just people in Coraki whose houses weren't impacted and they literally just took these people into their homes. So we've got two and three families living in houses that are probably meant for six people. Yeah, it's tragic.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** That was done so that people could stay together. In terms of planning for an evacuation, there are just different considerations it seems to me for First Nations people, that they need to be kept together. I am just wondering if we need in our planning separate principles around what to do in an emergency because they're not complicated criteria to me; they're just really simple: Keep everyone together.

**REBECCA WOODS:** That meeting that Mal Lanyon and he brought his staff here with him and I were there and that sort of thing, you know I said to them we needed a dedicated resource. Because what often happens is the Government agencies' profile, you know, they don't really have a profile with Aboriginal people. You know,

it's kind of they only intersect where, you know, there's an absolute need. So in circumstance of a crisis, for example, they don't have this profile that Aboriginal people are readily aware of or know how to use and what we were basically—I said to Mal Lanyon, "You know, it's not good enough just to sit there and say, 'Keep bringing the helplines'." We needed a dedicated resource to assist those people; otherwise, they'd fall through the cracks. That is exactly what has happened.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** Ms Woods, can I please ask, when you say "dedicated resource"—and I'm sorry we're so over time—

**The CHAIR:** This is the last. Apologies to everyone. This is the last question.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** —but what exactly are you talking about? Be very specific. Is it a person? Is it like: How much money? How many people? What is the dedicated resource that you're requesting?

**REBECCA WOODS:** I think it's all of those things.

**ARABELLA DOUGLAS:** But it's also a dedicated area. What we have to really lobby for and to improve the stress upon Ballina as a town, and to not feed into a tension of racism and then people inside the town, Chris took the approach, and I think it was absolutely right, to want to keep the community as one bloc, together in one location. That helps in a myriad of ways, both with community and cultural support. But it also helps with not creating tension in the town. We have large families, I meant to mention to Chris as well. He's got some families with eight children, 10 children, so that's very difficult to do in a couple of bedroomed-places or in a couple of pods, even. So we are now working with them to plan a pod, you know, a sort of sequence of pods, that works for larger families. You have to conceptualise a community family, not a nuclear family, to actually get some traction and some support.

**REBECCA WOODS:** Yes, because in our culture we have kinship responsibilities. I am aware that we are over time but I just wanted to finish by saying one thing: Bogal, as a local Aboriginal land council, owns land in freehold and, as part of, you know, putting together our own response, we identified land where short term and long term housing could go. Like, we did that ourselves. We said to Government, "We own land. You know, it doesn't have the infrastructure in the ground, but it could be a medium or long-term solution—not just for Aboriginal people that have been impacted." Like, we own a lot of land around town so, like, you know, I'm surprised people didn't come to us and say, "You know, all that land that you own, could we build some medium to long-term housing on there to help relieve the stress of the people that have been impacted?" Not a single person has come to speak to me.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Can I just say—

**The CHAIR:** This is the last question.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** No, only that I was here and I saw community services trying to manage 12 families, not one community.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** Take that as a comment, not a question.

**The CHAIR:** That was very good. Thank you for your time, Ms Douglas and Ms Woods. Please do not forget to send us a copy of your submission.

**ARABELLA DOUGLAS:** We have a full submission, but as I indicated in the preliminary document, we are making a comprehensive submission to Mary O'Kane's inquiry and I would really ask you and invite you to read it thoroughly because it will have more about the science piece and how Indigenous peoples may be of greater benefit to the region than potentially suspected.

**(The witnesses withdrew.)**

**Mr NICK RICHARDSON**, Management Committee, BayFM Community Radio, affirmed and examined

**Ms MIA ARMITAGE**, Anchor and Executive Producer, BayFM Community Radio, affirmed and examined

**The CHAIR:** There is provision for a short statement if you wish—two to three minutes or a little bit longer, depending.

**NICK RICHARDSON:** We would like to take that, if that's okay? I would like to begin by acknowledging the people of the Bundjalung nation, the traditional custodians of the ground on which we now meet, and pay respects to Elders past, present and emerging. We are BayFM, Byron Bay community radio from just up the road, and we are here to talk about communication. We made a submission because we wanted to explain about how we were able to help during the recent floods and ongoing and suggest ways we might be able to do more. I would like to hand to Mia Armitage, who heads up the community newsroom and has a personal perspective.

**MIA ARMITAGE:** Four days after floods and landslides devastated much of the Northern Rivers, including my new home town of Lismore, I was finally able to buy petrol for my car, drive through newly reopened roads past a fleet of Fire and Rescue trucks and the mud army convoy en route to Lismore to arrive at the heart of my work as a regional journalist at BayFM community radio station in Byron Bay. I will never forget how grateful our community leaders were the second I could invite them to join me live on air. Whether it was police confirming rumours of a buried body in Upper Wilsons Creek or a baby born in the stranded community of Wanganui, the Byron mayor promising to ask the army for help rebuilding the bridge to Upper Main Arm or the Ballina mayor letting us know how the community of First Nations people further south on Cabbage Tree Island were doing, local voices embraced their local community radio.

We announced the need for a volunteer security guard at the Byron Bay Community Centre in order to open an emergency shelter in the morning. By afternoon that need had been heard and met in the community, thanks to our service. We have community support. We are proud of the role we play as the voice of our community and how we add hyper-local, even personal details to broader information shared by our beloved ABC. But next time we face disaster we want our community to be better prepared, and as we recover we want to help our community built back better. We are ready and our mics are on.

**NICK RICHARDSON:** Ongoing we think we can help in three ways. One is at the time of such an event with officially verified, timely information, which is what we were doing to the extent that we could last time out. Secondly, we can assist with recovery. We have become a community hub for people and services to help them get together and regenerate and share the things that they need and get things done. That work is still ongoing at the moment. Thirdly, we also think that we can help with mitigation by helping people prepare and educating people around the things they can do to try and reduce the impacts of events such as this, but also fires, storms, health events, whatever. We recognise that we need to plug into a broader communications network and there is such a model that we are aware of in another State and that might be a starting point for you; I don't know.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Whereabouts?

**NICK RICHARDSON:** Victoria. I just didn't want to use that language in the room, but there it is, I've said it. What's the body called there—Emergency Management Victoria has a certification program with community radio stations. I understand something like 10 stations are signed up to that, with maybe more to come. But it is dependent on resources, so it is an optional program at the moment. I don't really know how it works. Our national body will be able to speak to that in greater detail.

**The CHAIR:** Ms Armitage, do you have any experience, or was this job simply thrust upon you?

**MIA ARMITAGE:** Could you elaborate? What do you mean?

**The CHAIR:** The role that you and the radio station took on during this crisis—do you have any experience in that or was it simply just thrust upon you?

**MIA ARMITAGE:** A bit of both. The first time it was thrust upon me was during what is called the Black Summer, but for us began in spring. Thankfully we did have another volunteer other station who had experience working for the ABC in developing their emergency broadcasting systems. So, yes, I had experience; yes, it also was thrust upon me.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Thank you for your submission. One thing you are missing is the humour that you managed during that time, which was very welcome to everyone. I live in the area. I know that when the internet went out it was very difficult to get news reports downloaded. In fact, I think the guys were joking that something had downloaded, they didn't know what it was but they were going to play it. I wondered

if you have any comments about that and the importance of radio stations in a crisis and actually disaster proofing them, if I could put it like that, because it is such a critical source of information for communities, the typical things we can do for our radio stations.

**NICK RICHARDSON:** Yes. Obviously, community radio is a community bond. We're here to amplify and connect the community, so any means we have to shore that up is better. Improved signal, improved reach, improved coverage, improved funding, improved programming—all of those things help to make the bond stronger. We are a community hub in the way that other community organisations are. Yes, I think it's great that you do mention the humour because we did try to take a little bit of the stress out of this for people, as well, because it's 24/7 for most people. I've still got people living with me now; I mean, it's ongoing.

**MIA ARMITAGE:** But if you're talking about backing up internet and services—

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Yes, exactly, and having potential growth.

**MIA ARMITAGE:** Absolutely essential for us, yes.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** I think we asked the ABC as the emergency broadcaster, but I don't think they're giving any evidence. Can I ask you about the role of emergency broadcaster? Is that essentially what you're saying needs to be assumed?

**MIA ARMITAGE:** Yes, we have played a role in that.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Can you describe how that works?

**MIA ARMITAGE:** How we help with—

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Your role in the emergency broadcasting.

**MIA ARMITAGE:** Yes, "hyper-local" is really how you would sum it up. ABC is our emergency broadcaster. Unfortunately, there are pockets where the reception is terrible, and people there were unable to get ABC. We heard later, or at some point during the emergency period, that these people were more or less clinging onto their little old-fashioned battery-operated radios and tuning into 99.9, so we were really careful to make sure that we were providing that hyper-local information for those people. When I say "hyper-local", it's in our submission but we're talking about names of streets and the names of creek crossings.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** My understanding is that the ABC gets provided with a script from the SES that then gets read out every hour.

**MIA ARMITAGE:** I can't speak at all for what happens at the ABC.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** No, I'm not sure either.

**MIA ARMITAGE:** But what we do know is that the ABC has had to broadcast and serve a huge geographical area and that as this climate catastrophe expanded across such a massive region, there were times where they had to stop sharing information that was relevant to the North Coast specifically, and switch to their newsroom at ABC Mid North Coast. If you're someone who's panicking up in Mullumbimby or Main Arm, you really could be waiting hours before it's going to switch back to you. That's where BayFM could step in and fill those sorts of gaps—plug those gaps, if you like.

**The CHAIR:** Ms Armitage and Mr Richardson, you referred to timely information. How did you determine what information to put live to air? What was the selection process? How did you distil what you actually put live to air?

**MIA ARMITAGE:** It was very much in the moment, thinking on our feet there. How did we—

**The Hon. ROD ROBERTS:** Chair, may I help you and ask a question? Ms Armitage, before you determined what you were going to prioritise to broadcast, where did you get that information from? Were you fed stuff from the SES? Were you fed stuff from police or other emergency services? Where did you get that information from?

**MIA ARMITAGE:** I'm very resourceful, as a trained journalist. I've got some contacts already so, yes, I was able to get—

**The Hon. ROD ROBERTS:** But they didn't reach out to you, then?

**MIA ARMITAGE:** It was both, yes. I do have some good rapports that I've built up in my time here on the North Coast, so it was a combination. Fortunately, because I don't live in the Byron shire anymore—I've moved to the Lismore local government area—I was one of the few people at the station who still had a working telephone and working internet in my home office. I was getting messages from anyone who was able to get

reception. I was speaking with the mayor of Ballina. I couldn't get onto the Byron mayor for a few days, but I was able to get onto the Ballina mayor for minutes at a time until she'd lose her reception—the SES as well. I'm on the email list for all these sorts of organisations so, yes, I get all their press releases.

**NICK RICHARDSON:** You can take from that that Mia's very connected, and that's a benefit for us. But in terms of being official networks and proven systems, we're not part of those.

**The Hon. ROD ROBERTS:** That's what I was getting at. If Mia wasn't connected, what would you have had?

**NICK RICHARDSON:** We'd be less helpful, is what we'd be.

**The Hon. ROD ROBERTS:** That's what I'm getting at. If emergency service providers, whether it be police or SES or RFS or whatever, were to provide you with those established streams of information, you'd then be able to broadcast it in a much more efficient manner.

**NICK RICHARDSON:** Of course.

**The Hon. ROD ROBERTS:** So we need to look at establishing a chain of communication.

**NICK RICHARDSON:** Yes, absolutely. Bang on.

**The Hon. ROD ROBERTS:** Thank you. That's what I was trying to elucidate.

**The CHAIR:** Ms Armitage, you wouldn't be giving evidence and you wouldn't be speaking if you didn't think that you provided a worthwhile service. What made you better at it, or more flexible? What made your service more worthwhile to the community?

**MIA ARMITAGE:** More worthwhile than—

**The CHAIR:** Other traditional sources that you would get, which would be other radio stations. What were you able to do that other radio stations weren't able to do?

**MIA ARMITAGE:** Again, I'd say it's all about hyper-local. It's knowing the community—knowing who they are, how to contact them and all the different groups, as well, and knowing which social media groups are the ones to tap into. A place like Byron still does have that small-town feel and that concept of one or two degrees of separation, if you like. Once you've been here a couple of years, or if you've joined a group where people in that group already know most of the key players within the community, it isn't that hard to get in touch with them. Those sorts of contacts are the kinds of contacts that I think people in a centralised metropolitan office just wouldn't have. In fact, I have had people from outside the region contact me asking for contacts. Does that make sense? Does that answer your question?

**The CHAIR:** Yes, it does.

**NICK RICHARDSON:** Just to add to that, in terms of other competing communication options, unfortunately, the Lismore community radio service was down. I think Paradise in Ballina was down also.

**MIA ARMITAGE:** And NimFM.

**NICK RICHARDSON:** The ABC North Coast, as we've discussed, is sketchy because it's a wide footprint and cannot reach everybody. Of course, mobile down, TV down, internet down, everything else down, so for some people we were their only option.

**MIA ARMITAGE:** And, I may add, I also work part-time at another news outlet that's called Echo Publications. That's a traditional weekly print newspaper and an online daily. My two editors at that paper were both isolated as a result of the floods, both disconnected as a result of a loss of phone and internet. Again, it fell upon me to get all of those essential updates out to the community online through the services that I still had—thank God—and through the contacts that I was able to reach so quickly.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** Thank you for your submission and for the services that you provided to the community during these terrible months. What specific recommendations would you make to this inquiry for assistance to enable your radio station and other community radio stations to alert the community and continue to communicate to the community as you did? What recommendations are you making to ensure that you're able to continue to do that, and potentially to do it better and more strongly and to reach more people during emergencies in the future?

**NICK RICHARDSON:** That's really about resilience building, which is kind of the topic of conversation for everything, really. We're seeking to ensure that, firstly, we continue to exist. We, like all community stations, run on the smell of an oily rag. We haven't been able to update our equipment in the studio

for some time, so that in itself presents a threat. Of course, we rely on support from the community, and the community's down. We can't go and ask for money from local businesses and community members. In fact, we were about to launch our biggest fundraiser ever, three days after the floods hit, so immediately we had to suspend that because it was not right for us to go out and ask for money when everyone else was doing it so tough.

The means through which we're able to raise funds in the local community is a primary issue so, firstly, we need to remain in business, if you like. Secondly, we need to become resilient, so that when storms or floods do hit and take out a lot of communications infrastructure, we have redundancy and backup. So we have generators at the transmitter site; we have generators at the station; we've got some means of transmitting broadcasting remotely so that if the station itself goes down we've got some sort of fail-safe option there. It's those kinds of things. It's preparing for the worst, I guess, really.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** In terms of specific contributions that the Government may be able to make to the community—not that we are the Government; we're an upper House inquiry that will make recommendations. But for community radio to be able to provide these essential services, to be a little bit more specific—you're saying "resilient". But to be a bit more specific—contributions towards renting where you broadcast out of? I think that you're all volunteers, aren't you? Is that correct?

**NICK RICHARDSON:** We pretty much all are volunteers so we all have other jobs.

**MIA ARMITAGE:** The newsroom does receive a little bit of funding from the Community Broadcasting Foundation.

**NICK RICHARDSON:** But the station's operations itself are not funded from elsewhere so we just scratch around and raise money as best we can. We would need capital investments to improve the equipment. We would, ideally, need ongoing support to make sure that we are able to maintain high standards of service and as part of this there may even be some kind of service level agreement. That's the thing I think that operates in Victoria, where they agree to respond 24/7. But, of course, they need resources to be able to do that because you can't just phone up a volunteer at 3.00 a.m. and say, "Get in there right now", when their house is flooded as well.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** Your evidence is that, because of the impact on the community who normally support you at this time and because so many people are struggling to pay the rent and get by and their income is lost, your existence in the short term is under threat, let alone able to provide this best service.

**MIA ARMITAGE:** It is.

**NICK RICHARDSON:** It puts us in jeopardy, absolutely.

**MIA ARMITAGE:** And it's the third time it's happened to us. It began with the fires and then the pandemic. The station was locked down. I know businesses lost a lot of money and staff and, yes, now this one.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** I just want to comment that—and I do have a question that tags with it. But we were all using Facebook to communicate—"Where is the evacuation centre?" People could go in, donate or feed people. Then, when the internet went out, it 100 per cent became radio and it was the ABC, which is a regional radio station, so the flood levels, which they need to read out to everybody every hour, were taking 10 minutes to read because it was every—you know what I'm saying?

**MIA ARMITAGE:** Yes, I do.

**NICK RICHARDSON:** Yes, we heard them.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** So in terms of your point about hyper local, this is the only possible mode of information. When in a disaster any information is gold.

**MIA ARMITAGE:** Yes, so I guess an example would be the lack of supplies. If we cast our minds back—

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Exactly.

**MIA ARMITAGE:** The highway was closed for a while, the fuel and the food weren't getting in, right? A lot of people in our area needed to get some of their supplies from the centre of Byron—the Byron Bay CBD—which is where our station is. Once though the internet was down, people were literally scrambling to find out, "Well, can I get fuel now? Am I going to be able to hit the road yet? Can I get out? Can I go and help people outside of Byron?" That was the sort of information that we could impart—you know, the back ways. "You can get through to Byron not by Ewingsdale Road. Ewingsdale Road is still closed off. But I've just driven through Bangalow Road and the exit off the highway to Bangalow Road is still open"—that sort of information.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** It was critical.

**MIA ARMITAGE:** And, "If you're in Byron Bay, forget about parking up near Marvell Street", or whatever it is. That sort of information is what we're able to get out. That's the kind of information that people wanted to know around where we were, as well as things about schools. Is the school open? Can they get to the school? Mullumbimby State high, I think, stayed open for a bit but you had to have your gumboots, while other schools were closed.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. That brings us to the end of our afternoon session. Thank you for your time, Ms Armitage and Mr Richardson.

**(The witnesses withdrew.)**

**(Short Adjournment)**



**The CHAIR:** Welcome to today's public forum for the Select Committee on the response to major flooding across New South Wales in 2022. This session is an opportunity to hear directly from people who have been impacted by the floods on the North Coast. The public forum is a relatively new innovation to the New South Wales Parliament so please bear with us. We have at least 15 registered speakers so far at this stage. Before we commence, I would like to make a few brief comments about procedures for today's forum. Speakers have been asked to register. For those who wish to register, there are secretariat staff here. For individual speakers, you will have approximately five minutes to address the Committee and there will be a warning bell to indicate at 3½ minutes. That will give you an indication to wind up or draw your comments to a conclusion.

I also wish to remind you that what is being said today is being transcribed and will be streamed live to the Parliament's website and will be included in evidence to this inquiry. It's also important to note again that, while all parliaments are covered by parliamentary privilege, Committee hearings and public forums are not intended to provide forums for people to make adverse reflections about others under the protection of privilege. In that regard, it is important that participants focus on the issues raised by the inquiry's terms of reference and try to avoid naming individuals unnecessarily. Finally, I sincerely thank those who have come forward to share their experiences. It is important that the Committee hears individual personal experiences of those directly affected by the floods. I hope that it will help form, shape, inform and formulate important recommendations for the Government. Mr Robert Commens, you have the privilege of being the very first public forum participant.

**Mr ROBERT COMMENS**, before the Committee: No-one can be better than me yet. I appreciate the opportunity to talk to you all today. What I want to put forward is my experience as a farmer. I'm a manager of 500 acres of macadamias on the flood plains at Wardell. We have 77,000 trees planted across that property. To date, over the last three years of the project, we've invested around about \$12 million into that project. What I really want to highlight to the group is the lack of drainage management. We understand that on the flood plain it floods regularly and we will often have three to four minor floods a year—quite comfortable with that. What happened in this event in February was that, I believe, the water that was sitting in the drains did not drain away, so it exacerbated the flood impact when the water from up-catchment did come.

Why didn't it drain away? Because the floodgates, which is a one-way valve and which is designed to close during high tides and open during low tides—this low ground property has been farmed for multiple decades. They have not been maintained. Mangroves grow up into there and then they grow around the gate and the gate only opens 20 per cent of what it should. Now, that's simple physics and that means it's going to take a lot longer for that water to drain away. In this situation it meant that we had a lot fuller drains when the floodwater did come. It probably meant that we had a foot or two-feet higher water than we should have, in my opinion. Why aren't they maintained? As a farmer, I would happily pay for the cost of it, and we would maintain them. But there is excessive green tape prohibiting this.

There are three government departments involved in the point of the floodgate out to the river. There are excessive approvals required. We're talking about NSW Fisheries, the department of water, and council, as well as the Department of Primary Industries, and I think the department of main roads as well. We're talking about a four-metre strip of drain that requires four government departments' approvals. There is a requirement to complete an environmental impact statement. That is ridiculous. We're talking about a four-metre strip, and this is potentially a \$50,000 environmental study when it is a \$250 solution. It's a drain. An excavator would clean it out. We would've been in a much better position on our property, as well as the local community in that Wardell region.

I think that this should be highlighted. It would've been a common issue across the three rivers: the Clarence, the Tweed and the Richmond. Previously there has been drainage management unions. They don't exist anymore. There needs to be a better solution for this. It is not a case of investment stopping this from happening. Growers—whether it's sugarcane, macadamias or cattle—invest a lot more money than the cost of these drains. They would happily co-contribute to that. It is the bureaucracy that is prohibiting that, in my opinion.

The second point that I want to flag, which I'm sure other people will, is the release of grant funding. Straight after the floods you're in a wonderful place in your head—in this really happy place—and you're asked to jump into this excessive bureaucracy. It is incredibly frustrating and damaging to people's mental health. We applied for the grants months ago, and we are yet to receive any funding. I understand the requirement to handle public money professionally, but I think that it has been prohibitive and restrictive, and is having the opposite effect. I think consideration should be given to getting more money out sooner and having much stronger punishment for people who did the wrong thing and make specific cases and examples of that. So they are the two points I would like to flag, and I appreciate the time to do it.

**Mr TONY BROWNE**, before the Committee: Thanks for your time. Just as a bit of background, I'm 55 years old. My occupation is IT consultancy, but I also work with farmers in consulting around regenerating

their farmlands. That's my real passion. My wife and I moved down here about seven years ago. We've also been part of a lot of community organisations, including 4ZZZ board member in Brisbane and board member for Paradise FM. I helped establish Young Farmers Connect with Joel Orchard, who will be speaking next. It is a local organisation, which is now national. I'm a board member on Wardell CORE at the moment, which is the recovery hub in Wardell.

I'll start with another natural disaster, which is the fires back in 2019-20. I was working an IT job as well as doing biodynamic spraying for farmers, and also at night jumping onto fire trucks and fighting fires. Most of the experienced firefighters said they'd never before seen behaviour like that in fires. At times we had to park those trucks in the shed because we'd been going since August, for a lot of the crew members—the volunteers—and they just didn't have the legs in them to do it anymore. One of the things that I think really struck me, both from those fires and then these floods, is the fact that we just need more people power and we need to be more cross-disciplined and agile in what we do.

We had the army turn up, and that was after eight days from when the water began receding. The army was brilliant in helping us, but they had a very narrow remit. Really what they were doing was focusing on lifting stuff out of houses and putting it on the footpaths. But they didn't have a hammer or pliers or any tools to help us rip the nails out or hammer them in, or do some basic repairs to stairs to help people get in. There wasn't heavy equipment there to help with a lot of driveways and things like that to do it. So, going forward, one of the things that I think is really important is we need to be more agile and cross-disciplined. If we were able to get a couple of young, strong, fit army people onto the backs of fire trucks, for instance—if they had done some basic training—that would have made a difference in all of our responses to natural disasters. Because this isn't just a response over a number of weeks; this is going to take years to recover from.

One of my other points is that we can't just rely on volunteers, who came from all around the country, to continue to do that without at least being able to give them some money to help pay their expenses—their rent, their mortgage or whatever. So another thing that is really important is that people who are throwing themselves in for months on end are easily able to get some compensation for their efforts. Because that is what we are going to need going forward.

It's not just dollars. I think, as Rob just mentioned, the grants system takes a long time. But it is not just about dollars. We actually also need people to be there to show kindness and build trust in our communities, and to have a place for people to come to. That's part of it for Wardell CORE. For us, right now we are out of the hall while it gets repaired, and we are not likely to go back there now. We are now in a private residence that is a quarter of the size. We are paying 550 bucks a week in rent, which could be going to the community, and we're going to run out of money. So we need those places. The pub has shut down. The sport and rec club has shut down. It's probably good; we don't need a place with alcohol. We need a place, not in Ballina, not in Alstonville, but in our little community for people to attend.

The other thing that is really important out of this is that we're bailing out the boat and we're trying to get more effective at bailing out the boat but, from a big-picture point of view, we've got to plug these leaks. I look at this river. I was really surprised when we moved down here; I think it had a grading of minus D. There is a lot of topsoil in there. There is a lot of talk about dredging. But my experience in regenerative agriculture talks about the riparian zones and having the vegetation up there to hold the water in the landscape. Probably that came through in the First Nations address as well: We need to actually care for our landscapes and put more effort into that. As well, it's the big-picture thing with climate change. This is about national security. This is a real emergency. It has happened here, but one day this will happen over Sydney.

**Ms MARIA MATTHES**, before the Committee: Thank you all for the opportunity to have a say today. I have a few hats on. Firstly, I am a flood-affected person. I had a metre and a half of floodwater in my house at Bagotville. Bagotville never gets mentioned in all of the reports everywhere and even the mayor said a month and a half after the event, "Oh, were you flooded?" Some of these areas in the rural community get forgotten for too many weeks after the event. Uninsured due to \$20,000 a year premiums after 2017. Living in my camper trailer for almost three months with not really any end in sight. I was prepared for a big flood, a one-in-100-year flood, like most of the people in my community. So the other hat I wear is I am president of the Tuckean area landholders' group, which is about 98 per cent of farmers, and most of them have been through numerous floods in the Tuckean swamp over the years.

Everyone has planned and designed; they have got mounds built up to the one-in-100-flood level. Everyone did what they were supposed to do for a one-in-100-year flood. But this was beyond that. I appreciate the enormity of the scale of the thousands of people that are homeless, the thousands of people that everyone is trying to help. It's just difficult when you have this huge event that is beyond all expectations in height, in the period of inundation. The water stayed around for so much longer than any other flood. Where I am, I think the

highway helped a bit in holding the water back. Then it couldn't get out of the Broadwater into the river from the swamp. So it was substantially 10 days before the water had retreated from my property, instead of three.

We have also found the whole grants process quite difficult to go through. It's been a surreal experience. You're not expecting that to have been the outcome. When it was, it's like—you don't know how to move forward. You don't know what all this means. You can't find people to help you. If you've got a mate, you can—I was lucky. I had my electricity, two power points put on in two weeks. But I know there were people waiting up until four weeks ago to get their first two power points. It's just not an easy time. There isn't any mechanism to make these sort of catastrophic situations that deal with large numbers any better. Resilience NSW really have not been prepared for such an event as this. I hope they are in the future. Wardell CORE and Broadwater and Woodburn and Coraki hubs are what has held the people and the communities together and provided those places for voices to share stories and everything. They need more support. Disaster Relief Australia and Samaritan's Purse are fantastic. But it's next week that I'm getting someone to help me take the nails out of my house. Thank you.

**Mr NICK CROUCH**, before the Committee: Thank you, Walt. Thank you for taking an interest. Thank you for coming. I represent about 1,000 people who signed up overnight for a lobby group, who want to sue what is formerly known as the RTA, Transport for NSW, because they're concerned that, when we built this important infrastructure, we stuffed it up. There was a lot of consultations that happened, that was said to be more ticking a box rather than listening to locals saying that the six-metre highway that is going to be built upon the flood lands between here and 60 kilometres south was going to impact on the flooding. It may have done so. It may not. We don't know. We will only know when we get hydrology reports which Transport for NSW are compiling now, which are not being provided to us.

I have a QC who specialises in environmental law, who's happy to help us. I have the person who wrote the standard on flood mitigation for Australia trying to help us. But we need the data, to have a look, to independently verify if the road has contributed to the loss of Vanessa over there, whose house is brand new, which is now worth not half of what it was a little while ago. That's the problem. There's 1,000 people whose houses now are worth half what they used to be. If it was because of the road, then let's identify that. We don't want to blame the RTA. We certainly don't want a class action. But we'd like to get to the detail and have scientists, hydrologists and lawyers independently tell us what actually happened. You are the key to all that.

If you can provide that information, if you can tap the RTA on the shoulder, it will help 1,000 people like Vanessa over there, who now are not sure. They are bitter. They are angry. They are flood victims. I'm a flood victim as well. Directly behind this is my shop that went underwater for the first time ever. Maybe some of that water on that 60-kilometre levee wall, that dam wall, flowed down the river and hit my shop as well. If it has, then the shop that I purchased recently is only worth two-thirds of what it used to be. I get we all make mistakes. I'm not blaming anyone. We don't want to sue anyone. I cannot reiterate that enough. But we would like to know if there was a mistake. You can help us do that. I really urge you to do that, because there's a lot of anger out there. I'm really surprised at it as well. You guys are the key to it.

We're not getting anywhere with Transport for NSW yet. To be fair to them—we've only knocked on their door recently. They may come forward and assist us. If they do then that's great. They'll find that we want to collaborate, we want to work with them. We just want the answers. They do a fantastic job. It's critical infrastructure. But if it's wrecking my shop and her house, then we'd like to fix it. But without the hydrology reports—the hydrology reports are hard to get. The ones that the RTA did—they commissioned five reports. Maybe the first one didn't quite say what they want. There's allegations the road was running behind time. If we built a bridge instead of a six-metre lump of dirt on the quarries that we made there, then it was going to cost a lot more. Maybe that was a question for what we were doing. Maybe that's something we can look at as we progress highways.

That's something which can perhaps help other communities. If that was a factor, then let's identify that as well. But the starting point for us is where the water would've flowed across from our houses, down to Evans Head, along the established waterways, it hit a six-metre wall that didn't have enough holes in it. We need you to tell us: Is that right or is that wrong? That's it.

**Mr DANIEL AINSWORTH**, before the Committee: Thank you, Committee members, for your time and letting me tell my story. I come here today as a resident of Broadwater who has experienced the floods firsthand and suffered significant damage to my home and to my community of Broadwater. I'd first just like to note that I am an employee of the New South Wales Government and have worked for the Rural Fire Service for more than 20 years, with extensive emergency management experience. However, my views today are not linked or endorsed by the Rural Fire Service or the New South Wales Government. As a result of the aftermath, I took 2½ months' leave off to deal with the aftermath and the events, to assist my community in the recovery process as best I could.

As I left work on the afternoon of 25 February, the latest information from the SES and the BOM was to expect a minor flood peak in Woodburn on Saturday. This usually means no effects for Broadwater. Come Saturday morning, from what had been a wet week, the rain began to clear somewhat. The latest information from the SES was that Coraki had peaked and Woodburn would fall below minor once the high tide passed. No information was released indicating there was any threat to Broadwater at the time. At 4.30 p.m. on Saturday afternoon the predictions from the SES began to warn of moderate to major flooding from Sunday evening for Lismore and Coraki area—again no mention of Broadwater, with Woodburn advised to watch out for possible moderate flooding on the Monday night. That's major flood bulletin number 12 for the Richmond River. At this time, most people in Broadwater felt there was little danger as, in the past, Woodburn had to reach major levels before Broadwater felt any effects.

Come Sunday morning, the rain returned. People began seeing on the news the devastating floods in south-east Queensland and a warning that the weather system affecting Queensland may move south. By Sunday afternoon, the messaging being sent out by the SES mentioned possible moderate flooding in Woodburn by Tuesday morning—no mention of Broadwater. Most people in Broadwater went to bed, thinking it would be another flood for Lismore but nothing major. For those that stayed up and read the BOM updates, around 10.00 p.m. Sunday night the forecast for Lismore changed to a possible levee breach, with a similar flood to 2017 Lismore event, for which Broadwater was largely unaffected.

Early Monday morning, I woke to the news that Lismore levee had begun overtopping at a record height and Woodburn may reach the height of 1974 levels. I posted this to a local Facebook page to try and warn people to be prepared for a flood in Broadwater. I continued to do this throughout the day whilst preparing my own home for a possible 1974-type event. None of the messaging being released mentioned Broadwater, nor was there any sign of worry from Broadwater with the SES.

I believe this was because they were being overwhelmed by record flooding in Lismore, with new reports of people being rescued from rooftops in Lismore and downtown Lismore. At this point I spoke to other members of our local hall committee and we decided we would open our community hall for a space of refuge in case of need. My wife and I decided that we would be staying at our home, as it is two storeys and we had enough supplies to last a couple of days of isolation. We sent our kids to Ballina to stay with my mother, as we thought this would be safe. Come Monday afternoon and an evacuation order for the SES had been issued for Woodburn and low-lying areas of Broadwater. The message was confusing and mentioned the height of 3.2 metres on the Wardell gauge in Broadwater—which doesn't exist.

In 2017 when the floods reached these heights, the flood effect was minimal in Broadwater at 3.2 metres. Most homes are built to one-in-100-year levels, and those not built to one-in-100-year levels didn't see any danger at this point. A text message was also received but gave little information, which most people ignored as a result. People continued to prepare their homes, filling sandbags from a pile of sand that was left by the local council and had been dropped off next to the SES shed. Remembering in the past that it takes two to three days for a peak from Lismore to reach Broadwater, most people went to bed Monday night expecting to wake up and do a little more to prepare for the floodwaters from Lismore. By 10.00 p.m. Monday night, the water had broken the banks south and north of town and began filling the paddocks, which, although it was earlier than normal, was as expected.

As the water continued to rise faster, my wife and I took turns in checking the height from our second-storey veranda. By midnight it had entered our garage. We had the light items lifted upstairs and the heavy items above what we thought was a safe level downstairs. Once again, no flood message had come from the BOM or SES mentioning Broadwater, so we guessed the predicted heights from the Woodburn gauge. Come Tuesday morning, the water in Broadwater was one metre above the floorboards of most single-storey homes and the sound of private boats going up and down the street could be heard by residents. They were rescuing people from their rooftops and their second-storey verandas, just like what had occurred in Lismore 24 hours earlier, catching many by surprise and with no warning.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Ainsworth, how much do you have left?

**DANIEL AINSWORTH:** I have one page left. Is that okay?

**The CHAIR:** Go for it.

**DANIEL AINSWORTH:** I appreciate that. Thank you. In the south of town, it was reported that a wave went through at about 3.00 a.m., catching many in the caravan park asleep in their beds. It should be noted that the boats were all owned by private citizens. I personally did not see one SES boat that morning. The local SES unit at the time had eight members and received no support from other units. If it was not for the act of a local resident, who used an excavator to get the boat out from under the shed before the waters rose, the boat would

have fared the same fate as the SES trucks that were left in the sheds in Woodburn and became inundated with water. Sometime before 12.00 p.m. on Tuesday, my wife and I still at home, we decided that with the water still rising—it was now only 20 centimetres from our second storey—it was time to get out. We flagged down a passing boat and made the decision—sorry, I won't be a second. We made the decision to take our dog and leave our two cats behind. This was one of the hardest decisions we had to make and we hoped the floodwater would not go any higher. It didn't. It went about a foot into our second storey.

For two days we took shelter in a friend's place at Evans Head, not knowing how we fared. We had little to no internet and had lost contact with my mother and the kids in Ballina. We eventually got a phone call from my son and found out they were okay. For residents of Broadwater who stayed in town, they camped it out on the main hill in town, where they had taken their cars and caravans in the days prior to the event. Around 150 people stayed on the hill, isolated from power, water and sewer for many days. The locals banded together and fended for themselves, unable to get any assistance from the outside. Eventually they flagged down a passing helicopter and got a food supply drop. At this stage they were unable to get any assistance from outside and were unable to check in. If it wasn't for residents with private boats, I believe we would have seen many more people not make it out.

Once the water levels began to fall, our community rallied together, with no support from outside agencies. There was three foot of sand covering the main roadway north of town and mud everywhere else. We made contact with local contractors and arranged for the roads to be cleared, mud to be scraped away and debris to be piled up in a central location in town—all done by local coordinators and without local, State or Federal assistance. By 5 March we had set up our own community hub at the hall and had a coordinator in place to start logging jobs with assistants. By sheer luck we were able to have a platoon from the army airdropped into town. They were quickly adopted and we put them to work. I opened up the bowling club and gave them a place to stay. They set up a coordination centre in our hall. As we were already setting up jobs ourselves, the army was able to quickly integrate with our operation and work in place.

Until the roads opened up, the army was our only help and contact with the outside world. During all this, my wife and I managed to find a place to rent in Evans Head with the local real estate working behind the scenes with the department of housing to either cover costs or reimburse anyone who found temporary accommodation. At this time local leaders from Richmond also got together to form a recovery perimeter of our own, in the absence of any leadership anywhere else. The committee was made up of local school principals, local business representatives, local club representatives and the local government employee, and was chaired by the local police sergeant. We discussed ways to move forward. With the combat agency overwhelmed and not present anywhere in the towns, the move to recovery by government was non-existent, with the agency responsible for recovery having little to no staff on the ground. The staff who were around had been working nonstop since the event and were visibly under stress.

The Department of Communities and Justice had two staff members covering Broadwater, Woodburn, Coraki and Evans Head. Normally this would be okay. However, now they had to deal with five separate evacuation centres and a population of nearly 7,000, all looking for places to shelter. Resilience NSW didn't arrive on the ground for three weeks after the event, and only provided one staff member to cover the entire Richmond Valley and Kyogle shires. The staff member did their best, but they really had no support and became overwhelmed. The local clubs that opened their doors for those evacuation centres became frustrated with the lack of support and leadership from government agencies. Eventually the recovery committee received support by way of an army colonel, who had connections higher up in government and was able to progress things faster again. Without the army, the community would have been left behind.

My observations are that there was no leadership from the combat agency throughout the event, with no-one publicly standing up to lead the community through the biggest disaster in living memory. In the absence of a leader, each community fended for themselves. In the case of Broadwater, we all stood up and worked together to lead our own way in our town right from the start, from when anyone who owned a boat mobilised to help out, to those even today who volunteer in our community hub. I would like to see from this Committee two recommendations. First, if we can see that an automatic flood gauge is put in the three towns of Broadwater, Cabbage Tree and Wardell. Currently they have no way of telling besides looking at their manual gauge, so it may become unsafe. And, secondly, I would like to see a community engagement strategy from the combat agency that includes these towns for future flood events, as we were left off any public messaging that was released. That is all. Thank you for allowing me to go over time.

**Ms MICHELE BROWN**, before the Committee: From this point of view, I apologise for only having a few notes because I did not find out until late last night that this event was happening. I am a resident of Burns Point Ferry Road, which was worst hit initially in the West Ballina area. Prior to that, I lived in the Blue Mountains for 43 years. I am only a new resident, but all my children live here and we have been coming here for 20 years.

The fact of the matter is the response from police, SES and the fire brigade, from my point of view, did not really exist.

From a person who lived in the Blue Mountains for 43 years and fought fires, or also helped other people in the area—and I have worked in the community and was involved in that community—to see a no-show from anyone, eventually the SES came a few days in while my daughter and I were trying to sort things out about the house and what was happening inside. But, basically, this great community—and I'm staying here because I left a great one but I still want to be a contributor to the Ballina area—the people who turned up to help us were the local rugby club and different community people from churches and other leadership groups. Even while we were cleaning up, they would bring the food, water or come and check on us.

Prior to the flood—we live on the Ballina quays—we had two king tides, and my neighbours, who I'm very friendly with ranging from the time of 17 years to 21 years, have never seen a king tide as they were in January. So when we found out that the Ballina council were doing a flood mitigation exposé, we went along on 18 January. Now it turns out this was their third flood mitigation report in 20-21 years and my road, Burns Point Ferry Road, was number 14 on the list. Tamar Street, which runs parallel with River Street, the main road, was number one. Anyway, we all had a chance to speak but we entered submissions that we had a deadline that I think was for 7 February.

Last Tuesday one neighbour and myself went along just because I'd read the report. We'd all read the reports before we went to the 18 January. We know our submissions were received and then last week I was sent an email from the council to acknowledge that our submissions are now being projected into a file. It was called 10.2, you know, subsection 2, whatever, and I was handed that file which shows the topographical maps of their projection of what was going to happen in 28 years and 78 years—because their dates were 2050 and 2100, which is a question I raised on 18 January—Mother Nature and all that. Anyway, I wanted to acknowledge that fortunately they've taken into account some of the ideas or acknowledged what we submitted in our reports. Moving forward, they've taken us from number 14 to Burns Point Ferry Road now being number two behind Grant Street, which is perpendicular to the original street of Tamar.

I was thinking the mayor and one of the councillors might still be here because I didn't get a chance to address the meeting the other day, so I said to my friends, "I'll come today", and we'll say, "Yes, job well done. They've acknowledged us as residents." But, they're going to use the same engineers who have produced the same thought process over the last 21 years and they've been given a grant and they're giving it to the same people because they said they don't want to spend the money on a tender motion. Now, to me, nothing's been done in this time and with our being on number two on the list, it's a two- to three-year projection where the works might commence. But that is not satisfactory. So, I don't know if the council is money-poor or time-poor, but nobody's been to anyone's home to acknowledge and see how people are, the residents; and if so, even leave a note to say you've been because I'm not living in my home and I have had seven moves in and out of my children's homes.

But anyway, all I want to acknowledge is the council is saying what they're going to do but the rest of Ballina, where do they fit into the new scheme? Also I want to—I hope I'm not repeating myself—acknowledge the Ballina community and the support that came through and helping. Was there anything else I needed to say? Oh, as from the Blue Mountains, as I said, there were first responders and even the police would come down and sound the siren, so you knew what was going on; but we did, because we lived there a long time. But Shane Fitzsimmons, dare I say, he was the man who informed us, who kept us in the loop, and he was Action Man. We didn't have that up here. We had no-one at the top really letting us know and what was going on in our area. So that's all I'd like to say, but thank you for coming and thank you for listening to the residents because they do deserve a fair chance.

**Mr JOEL ORCHARD**, before the Committee: I thank the Committee for this opportunity. My name is Joel Orchard and I am one of the volunteer coordinators at the Wardell flood recovery centre. I'd also like to acknowledge that this has been an immense amount of volunteer contributions and our hub is only one of many that have grown up around the regions that follow quite a unique and agile but a pretty classic model of a volunteer or a community-led flood recovery centre. I just wanted to paint a bit of a picture of what that actually looks like so that this Committee can look at how to resource these community-led recovery centres in the future.

So, essentially, after the very urgent needs of the flood had passed, a small group of people managed to find some facilitation role and to support the coordination of all of the volunteers that were coming into the community to participate in the recovery—all of the foods and goods and emergency equipment that was required for people living in very desperate times at that moment. Then we've sort of developed as a much more coordinated organisation that provides an increasingly complex set of protocols that the community requires in terms of now trauma recovery, suicide prevention, housing, food access and more. We continue to provide effective and essential community care and connection for the community and services that we estimate to support over

400 flood-affected households all the way through from Ballina to Broadwater and inland even through Pimlico and Meerschaumvale, and of course including the Cabbage Tree Island communities, and all along the coast.

So within the first couple of months we established an organisation that had approximately four full-time volunteer coordinators and a whole host of coordinating effort that went into supporting volunteers that were really coming from all over Australia at that time. We had people rocking up from Sydney, Queensland, Far North Queensland, Victoria and even further afield, bringing donations and in some cases staying for weeks. And we've even had some volunteers who have now stayed for months on end at their own cost. A lot of these volunteers are paying for accommodation in the community while they work for free and have taken time or leave away from their professional jobs to contribute immense amounts of hours to our community. Within this time we also were tasked with coordinating Australian Defence Force personnel when they were in town. We delivered over 5,000 hot meals and ready-made meals to the community within the first couple of months. We took on the coordination of a number of full-time mental health service professionals that have provided absolutely critical mental health support in our community. They're still continuing to provide up to 20 caseload visits a day and they now do outreach throughout that region as well.

We manage those as a group of locals to leverage our personal and business relationships and we've distributed over about \$20,000 worth of fresh produce to the community and we've networked with a whole host of other community organisations and really facilitated an immense amount of support from local agencies like the Rotary clubs and Lions clubs and church groups and even those from further afield. We have now developed ongoing relationships with a number of neighbourhoods from cities like Sydney and Melbourne that are adopting us as a community of support. We've since had to incorporate as an association so that we can open a bank account and receive funding and we're even developing a strategic plan with a recognition that disaster recovery is a really long process. I note we've reflected on all levels of government literature that community-led recovery centres are absolutely the best and most agile way for all recoveries to be successful.

I have a whole list of resources that a number of government agencies have produced that proves that in point. Our question, and recommendation to this Committee, is why don't we see that literature that the Government has produced being put into action, and where is the support that this literature designates will be available for community-led recovery to be sustainable? We know that we can't provide the level of support that's going to be required ongoing unless we have the resources to do it. At the moment, we are now looking at including nearly double the number of people in our community with a demountable village from flood victims that will be placed in the Wardell community as well. I thought I'd just finalise by saying that even the royal commission into natural disasters said that most communities that go through a disaster of this kind will not recover before they're hit with a new one, and that we really need to establish and maintain this social infrastructure that we've built now so that we can be resilient into the future. Thank you.

**Mr GEOFF FINCH**, before the Committee: Thank you all for coming up here. I was born and bred on the North Coast. Sometimes we feel like we're kind of overlooked. State governments and Federal governments tend not to look at this area until it's an election, but you've come after the election so that's alright. I'm a small-business owner. I live in the Byron shire. I also have a background in doing volunteer aid work in foreign countries where they're war-torn. I'm used to disasters. I'm used to seeing personal hardships and that kind of stuff. It's nothing new to me. I've been in Kurdistan, Iraq, Sudan, the former Cambodia when it was war-torn and that kind of stuff. I know how to work with bureaucratic stuff and also with people in general.

The night of the flood—generally I take precautions. My house is in what they term "flood-labile land". Michael Lyon was the mayor for Byron shire. The shires tend to give us regulations for a purpose. I was able to build my house according to the regulation as flood liable. When the flood came up about a bit over a metre in my house—I have two storeys—my house was relatively untouched. I used aluminium doors, concrete floors, cement walls and all that kind of thing so I hardly lost anything whatsoever. I'm also a small-business owner with turnover in the six figures, so I lost three vans as well. It's the contents of those vans that, as a tradie, we need to get back on our feet again. With the council, with its education and all that with our houses, I find it a real blessing. I think it's not a problem whatsoever. There's such a thing that I see as contributory negligence, and that is that we contribute sometimes to our own problems without going through those regulations and sticking with them.

The night of the flood, I was on a job probably similar to the size of the RSL club. I had spray guns all set up ready to finish a job on the Sunday night to hand over to the people by the Monday morning. However, I go home and then find out there's a flood. The SES, unfortunately—I also do voluntary surf lifesaving, so I'm aware of voluntary organisations. Things can go wrong. I don't attribute any blame whatsoever in this disaster; it's just a natural disaster to me. With the SES, the text was sent out about 5.00 a.m. The flood actually came up at 2.00 a.m. in my place. The text message didn't arrive until midday. By that time, stuff was just floating around. I just want you to look outside there. You can't quite see it now, but the Richmond River is out there. Most of the small

businesses, our paperwork and all that floated out and off to the east coast of Australia—somewhere in the Pacific Ocean.

With my cars, generally I'm quite diligent when there's a flood coming. I look at the BOM and all that kind of thing so I'm able to move cars. But in this situation came up so fast—I'm not subject to the river. Although I live that close to the river, I'm subject to wet area that comes up. Water rises up and can't get away because the council drains fill up. That is no blame whatsoever to the council; it's just part of the problem with a wet area. With the cars in our neighbourhoods, one person's car locked up and blocked the escape of all the other cars. I get up at seven o'clock—I'd been up all night until about two watching this water come up and going, "My goodness, it's not going to stop. It's going to keep going," until I just gave up and went to bed. At 7.00 a.m. I hear a gurgling noise and I think, "Okay, I'd better get up. This flood's starting to up." But a car had blocked the roads and no-one could get their vehicles out. All I could do was just watch my cars just fill up with water.

I think I lost about \$200,000 worth of stuff. Some of it is insured, some of it is not. With that, my home office—you go into this mode where, "What do I rescue first? Do I rescue my taxation paperwork because I've got tax coming up? Forget any other things. Forget your personal stuff. Forget the cars; they're just going to float off. I'll deal with that in maybe two or three days' time. But what do I rescue first?" You start putting in this plan and then you raise it all up—but the floodwater keeps coming. You raise it up even higher and the floodwater keeps coming. You go, "My goodness! I was born here. I've never seen a flood like this and it's coming so fast." You get to 2.00 a.m.—well, you don't have lights. You cannot photograph anything for purposes later on, for insurance purposes or Service NSW. You cannot justify or prove that your place actually got flooded because the next day the floodwater is gone. What happens is then you're just left with this smelly mess to clean up.

After this, Service NSW came along. I thought, "Great, this is good. We are given a hope here, a breath of fresh air", thinking that we're going to be able to get grants to be able to reinstate—the wording—our small businesses back to where we were before the flood so we could carry on and do our service for the State. However, there's a lack of communication that Michael Lyon pointed out in the Byron shire. All the communication went down. Phones didn't work, internet didn't work—I think for about five days. My phone actually went through the flood. I think I had it in my back pocket and couldn't get it to work. You have a sense of relief when Service NSW go, "You know what? We have Federal Government funds here we will start to hand out." What happened was that when I applied for a grant of about \$30,000 to cover a vehicle—two of my vehicles were insured and one wasn't, for another purpose—the insurance companies, no problem whatsoever. I had a great time—excellent—with insurance companies.

When it came to Service NSW—and just to let you know that when I was talking with Service NSW on the phone and in emails, they record things for training purposes. In all fairness I said, "You know what? I'm letting you know that I will be assessing you as well, as Service NSW, on behalf of what you're doing for the New South Wales Government, and I will inform you of what happens." To reinstate my small business, I came across this non-existent fine print that doesn't exist. There's this terminology that can be used to bring it back against you. I can use it to work for me or to bring it back against me. I'm glad to see you guys here because I was planning on writing to subsequent departments and committees and that kind of thing to get this message through, that somehow or other when there's funding that comes out for a tradie such as me—there's something like 5,000 tradies that I know, at last count a couple of weeks ago, that have applied for funding but were just knocked on the head, just like that.

Out of those 5,000 tradies, we get this kind of a to-and-fro: "Yes, it's approved." In my case, four times emails went backwards and forwards: Yes, it's approved. You think, "Great, it'll be in the bank in three or four days." You go and do all the paperwork for them maybe six or seven times to prove things. The last one that really got me was that I was told, "Okay, Geoff, if you go out and you give us a letterhead now from the bank showing that you"—oh, by the way, we have to spend the money first. Some \$28,000 on a vehicle and another—my spray gun's \$5½ thousand, so we tried to cut costs and just got it repaired for \$1,300. I had to go and borrow that money. I had to borrow that money and then have to repay it again because Service NSW promised me on a number of occasions, "Yes, we'll have that money back in your bank account in three to five days."

What happened was I borrowed the money and then comes all the things: "No, we want to see your name on that. We want to see that you actually paid for that." I'm showing bank statements and all that. "Yes, you'll get it. No, you won't get it. We've closed your claim." You kind of go, "Are you serious?" I wrote back to Service NSW. I want someone who understands small business, not this person that keeps on referring to something that has nothing to do with it. So I went backwards and forwards four times, and I'm saying this so you're aware, for an inquiry, what we're up against. So what I found was that it doesn't actually come through. "Yes, we'll approve you", but the approval goes nowhere. It's just a roadshow, as they say. It's a roadshow, you know. I went to the roadshow. So I'm just letting you know that.



The cruellest thing that happened to me was on the fourth time when they rang back. They actually rang me, right? I won't give the person's name. I asked her over and over and over to give me another person to deal with that understands small business and understands the North Coast flooding. These people had no idea of floods. I'd asked them that. I was told, "Okay, Geoff, if you go to the bank now"—this was at 1.30—"If you go to the bank now and get a letter from the bank with your name on top of your statement", where it showed that I'd paid for the vehicle that I bought and paid for the other stuff, "then we will give that money and it'll be in your bank account this afternoon." So I went to the bank and, I kid you not, I got to the front door of the bank, the phone rang again, that same person: "I've just spoken to my colleague. We've decided that your claim is closed. You're not getting it." Bang. I walked out and I thought, "What was that all about?"

The problem is the mental health issues. This has been now 12 weeks—it's exactly 12 weeks—that the people of the North Coast have gone through this kind of stuff. And to put up with Service NSW, putting us to-and-fro, to-and-fro, and playing with people's emotions, you get your hopes up. The difference with the aid work that I do in Third World countries is I know what I'm up against. I know I'm up against corruption. I know that I'm up against the finances that have to come as donations from overseas. The difference with Australia is we have the money here. The Federal Government already allocated the money for it. Service NSW, all they had to do was just disburse it, and it didn't happen.

**Ms MELETA WOOD**, before the Committee: Good evening, everyone, and thank you for letting me speak. My name is Meleta Wood and I have lived in Ballina for 37 years and in my home for 29 years. My home is in Grant Street and it is a post-war house built for ex-servicemen, returned servicemen, so that's how old my house is. It never had water in it. So I think the main issue is that over the years that we've lived here, it has rained a lot. Ballina is known for a lot of rain and we did get a lot of rain in March. But over the years we have seen the change in how the water flows. When we first bought our house it had an open drain in front, which wasn't that attractive and probably not that safe, but it worked a lot better. As soon as we got kerb and guttering, that was the first time there was water appeared in our street. Followed by that is a lot of the building that's been going on in development out towards, out near Aldi. There is a new estate called Ferngrove. They built that Ferngrove on reclaimed wetland, which is a flood plain.

Other people talked about the road down south. The north road is built on a flood plain. If you build on a flood plain, the water's got to go somewhere. And if it's not going where it's supposed to go, it comes back, and it's coming back into Ballina. Like a lot of people, we heard that was going to be a flood and, oh yeah, Lismore's flooding. We had never flooded, my house. People who have lived in my street, it's never had water in it, so we didn't take much notice. We did get a text message but felt, "Oh, that's a bit strange", and then we got another one. My son and I, we just thought, "Well, maybe something that might happen", so we chucked everything we could, like, on the beds and on the tables and that, thinking, "This is not going to happen", but it did.

We lost all our furniture. We lived in the same house all our children's lives, so what I would like—I think what needs to happen is to take on board what effect this flood's had on the community, the individual people, but how it's happened, and how it could have been—I think there's a lot of indications that is needed to be taken into for this to see that it could happen, and building on flood plains is not the answer. And if they do, we shouldn't be building houses that are on slabs. We should be building them on piers so that at least the water can go underneath because the water's got to go somewhere. We live where it rains, and I know that it was extraordinary rain, but I can see that, you know, there's been indications on and on that there's things that should have been done.

The other issue in our street is that if you're building your home in Ballina, it's built up above everyone else's home. So what happens there is there's a newish home next to our home, water came down the street, around the corner, straight under my house, hit my back fence and got splashed back. It made a wave into the back of our house. If you saw Karl on the *Today* show, you would've seen it flowing down Grant Street like the river. And it wasn't just floodwater. We had sewage through our house. That's why I have no walls in my house because there was sewage went through my house. And that's my other question: How can a town like Lismore have a sewage plant that is not flood proof? Our river will not be able to be swum in for I don't know when. Our beaches are still filthy because they're pouring raw sewage into the river. So how does Lismore not have a flood-proof sewage plant? And I think someone needs to answer for that.

Just one other note: I am the coordinator for Meals on Wheels, and not having any internet and phone was a disaster for us because we could not ring any of our clients because they all have landlines or mobiles. We just didn't have anything. The other issue is we couldn't pay for anything unless we had cash, so there were people in Ballina who were paying for food for other people because no-one had cash. We raided our grandkids' money boxes so we could go and buy bread and milk. I think that's an important thing, the internet being down, and on other community services it was really bad. We had to wade into people's homes to check that they weren't there. Thank you.

**Mr ALLAN ANDERSON**, before the Committee: Hello, thanks for coming. I won't be real long at all. I didn't plan to do this. I just wanted to say that I was affected by it and I think in ways that everyone else has been. There's been a lot of mental health problems still happening and not diagnosed yet. The community's really suffering at the level of disaster that happened and nervousness and, yeah, I'm really sad for that. I was affected. I grow cane and rice, dryland rice, and others have spoken to you about the cane industry, I won't touch on that. On the rice, I think there's only approximately 30 growers of us. There might be only five of us that are able to salvage crops. It's going to be a huge detrimental stakeholder thing for the developing industry. With the drains, like the council spoke there before about it, like mitigation works and that, there's been no mapping or anything. There's been three studies done and no physical workings happening on the ground and everything is just deteriorating. That's pretty much all I've got to say. Thanks.

**Ms TAMARAH KNOX**, before the Committee: Thank you for the opportunity this afternoon to share my family's experience from the floods. I am here to represent my parents, Peter and Janelle Knox, who reside at Ross Lane, Lennox Head. Unfortunately, they're interstate and couldn't attend today. They have lived on the property for 37 years and it's where our family was raised. It's also next to Deadmans Creek and has a drainage network that feeds that creek that hasn't been manually cleaned in at least 10 years. This has been raised with Ballina Shire Council by my family over the past 10 years and especially in the past five, as we have noticed the flooding frequency has increased in the area. My family's property experienced flood again last week and that is the sixth time this year and potentially up to 15 times in the past 12 months. We now have weed growing on the property that comes from the creek and it continues to be that wet it now grows where there was once grass.

The black water now remains on the property for up to three weeks and this feeds into North Creek and obviously is not a positive run-off. The poor drainage around the area is contributed to from a lack of clearing that has happened in the drains, the culverts not being cleared, the gates being overgrown or full of mud and not working as they should. There is also an unused landing strip at the southern end of my family's property that contributes to holding the water. Deadmans Creek remains full at least 80 per cent all the time now. In speaking to my mother this morning she said, "How full is the creek, and is it raining again?" Such is the frequency that these are now the conversations that we have regularly. Any time it rains we expect that the property will flood.

The flood that we experienced in February-March inundated the property either side at least 10 metres more than it ever has and in some ways 20 metres, inundating two sheds with machinery and cars in them. Luckily, we had time to prepare and machinery has been able to be salvaged. The flood got to the front door of the house and what saved it was my father silconing the front door. Their jet ski was able to be tied up off the verandah of their house. They don't own a houseboat, this is completely a rare event and completely blows my mind to see those photos of it again. They were isolated on the property for up to a week on both occasions and when it floods now this past week it took three days for the water to recede for them to be able to leave. The water is deeper when it floods Ross Lane now than it has been previously, and as I mentioned, it floods more frequently.

The mayor of Ballina Shire Council mentioned earlier in this inquiry about the poor state of the river and for the mechanical works that need to be done. There are concerns about the acid sulphate, but when you have raw sewage going through there, why does this matter at this point? The river is in such a poor state now that if the land was dry enough we could be out there tomorrow excavating the drains ourselves with the equipment, we have the experience, we will fund it ourselves and go do it. The hold-up is purely waiting now for it to dry and once it is dry the hold-up is purely government bureaucracy and multiple levels of it. We need the State Government to support works being done and not saying wait for a catchment management plan or a coastal management plan to be done. We need action on the ground to happen now but in the meantime waiting for those plans to be done and then remain unfunded for the next however many years, my family's house will flood in that time, again.

Also just highlighting that three months on our house remains packed up because it flooded again last week. There are no photos on the walls, there is the bare furniture there, everything is on the top shelf of a cupboard. That's how my family lives every day until this wet season will pass. Hopefully that is October, but that is beyond anyone's control. Flood mitigation, I guess, and action and support are my key points from today, that we really need local government to be supported by State and Federal and when there is action to be taken we desperately need it to be done now. Thanks very much.

**Ms VIVIENNE GOREC**, before the Committee: Good evening. I live in Westland Drive, West Ballina. I rang the gentleman I bought the house off seven years ago. He bought it new and has never known the street to flood, ever, because there was a retention pond around the side of Horizon Drive and River Street. The retention pond was twice the size of Bunnings with its carpark and it used to hold megalitres of water. It has been filled and buildings put on it since 2019, which now the water's got nowhere to go except down our streets. Our drains are on the high side of the road. I did explain to the engineer I'm 74 and I've never seen water run uphill yet. We are

not learning by our mistakes. They just approved a housing estate in West Byron on the flood plain. They are going to do another one at Deadmans Creek on the flood plain. Where do they think this water's going to go?

We thought we were pretty lucky because we never got any water because of that retention pond. But when it got through, we knew we were going to have trouble, because you see all the mounds of dirt coming in and getting dumped in the hole and we thought, we're going to be in for it. And sure enough, we were. But what do we do? It's just like, oh well, bad luck. The thing that irks me about the whole lot is the whole area is now flooded and the insurance policies are going to go through the roof. So that's all I've got to say. I have actually got some photos here that shows you the size of the retention pond compared to Bunnings and you can tell yourself what it's doing.

**The CHAIR:** If you wish you can provide those to the Committee. Thank you.

**VIVIENNE GOREC:** I would like you to see them because you can see where they've filled in with hard surfaces and then you can see Bunnings, so you know the size of Bunnings and this is twice the size and we never had any worries.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. If you could provide that to us.

**Ms BEC HEYWORD,** before the Committee: Hi everyone. My young family lives at East Wardell on the way out to Patchs Beach, which you would have went past yesterday in your bus. Our family left at 2.00 a.m. as we saw the water come from the back of us. I just want to raise the concerns from many communities about lack of maintenance. I am not sure if you are aware of Bungawalbin levy. It was destroyed in 2017, major damage, never been repaired since 2017. We have also got the Woodburn Fabric Dam that was vandalised and hasn't been repaired. The most important thing is the flood mitigation drains. They haven't been looked after, they haven't been maintained for many years. There have been many committees involved lobbying trying to get this done, but it just seems to be passed on, reports being done, never ever a resolution.

Our house was affected because of these drains. The water from the back of our property didn't get out the week before. So, we have an original farm cottage that went through the 1954 and 1974 flood. We have also got a home that we built in 2006 to the AHD of 3.5 metres, and it went through that as well. If our floodgates could work and open and our mangroves weren't protected and we could remove them from the floodgate, we would have had half a chance out at East Wardell, because the flow-on effect from all this water coming down resulted negatively to all our communities. In 1974 there was an area in Boundary Creek and Moylans Lane where the floodwater naturally went to the ocean but then got filled back in. There is also an oyster channel out at South Ballina that was once used.

There are all these things that farmers and people that have lived here a long time talk about and know. I think it's important that—you could look at them and see why it's happening and why we haven't maintained them. Dugald Saunders is our State agriculture Minister. He has the power of veto but unfortunately he hasn't come to see us, hasn't come to our area and looked, and hasn't used his powers that he could do with Fisheries to help us get these works done to remove the overgrown mangroves and weeds from these drains. So, yes, there is a big problem with flood mitigation and it needs to be looked at. Thank you.

**Ms KERRY TURPIN,** before the Committee: Hello. My name is Kerry Turpin. I live in Wardell and I was fortunate enough not to be impacted with the floods at my home. But on the Monday I decided that it was going to be bad so I approached the committee of our sport and rec club to set up an evacuation centre. They were very hesitant. Most people felt that the flood wouldn't affect our town. I lobbied them pretty hard and we managed to set up a—I said, "This will be our evacuation centre." I went to the fire station and said, "That's our evacuation centre." We contacted the SES in Ballina and we were sort of part of the whole deal. That sport and rec club had no facilities. It just had toilets and a commercial kitchen and space and high ground.

By the Tuesday morning we had probably 60 to 70 people there and no food. So my daughter and I jumped in the car and drove into Ballina and collected 15 kilos of sausages as they were closing the road back to Wardell. From that time we were set. We were cut off by road. We had no phone and we had no internet. We had no coordinator. We had no police. We had no SES. We were fortunate enough to have a girl who works for Communities and Justice who had lost her house in Wardell, so she turned up in her brother's clothes and a phone. We needed to log all the people that we had at the evacuation centre. My daughter, who was eight months pregnant and needed to get back to Sydney, couldn't because the airport was closed and we couldn't get back there anyway.

She sat down and started to log all the people that were in Wardell that were either living in someone else's house—so the half of Wardell that wasn't flood affected had something like 13, 14 or 19 people staying there in their vans or in tents, with no food because we couldn't get to the supermarket. I was fortunate enough—I'm a volunteer for the Marine Rescue at Evans Head. Three of the boys had gone up to drop the fuel trailer at Goonellabah. They couldn't get home to Evans Head so they rang me and said, "Do you have room?" I added

them to the list and we had 13 people at my place. Luckily, one of the fellows had belonged to the local emergency council and he was able to make contact with the SES. The Rural Fire Service raced in and got a handheld radio so that we could talk to Ballina SES. Our problems were that we had all these people. They didn't have their pills. They had the clothes that they stood up in. We had people that had their animals that wanted to sleep with them. We had no coordinator to say, "This is how we should run it. This is what we should do."

Unfortunately, on the Monday night the club, which was a registered club, decided to open the bar and that brought with it another huge set of problems. We also have a group of Tongan workers in Wardell. They refused to stay at the evacuation centre because of some of the issues that you can imagine when we add some alcohol. So we had to find accommodation for them. The other problem is I was in my Marine Rescue uniform and the Rural Fire Service were in their uniform, but many people questioned who gave us the authority to do what we were doing. And the answer to that is no-one. We had no help from anyone. We have a police station in Wardell and even that was not functioning.

The army was supposed to drop food in. We kept getting a text to say that they would drop the food. That never happened. We know that some small communities were able to get private drops of food from Sea World, Channel 7, et cetera. We felt that the army was not very well coordinated. After we evacuated them—after day four because we were not suitable anymore as an emergency evacuation centre—I went and worked at the Rural Fire Service and, again, the army and Resilience came in and it was difficult because they had no idea of the local area so again another set of problems. But thank you very much for listening.

**Mr JOHN SYKES**, before the Committee: I'm a cane farmer on the lower Richmond, where our property is halfway between Woodburn and Broadwater on the western side of the Richmond River. I spoke to a neighbour on the Sunday morning and he said, "It looks like it's going to be a pretty big flood." We built a new home four years ago. It was built 500 above the one-in-100-year flood level, which was the 1954 flood level. On the Sunday morning we started moving our machinery. It was seven tractors, two harvesters, a 20-tonne truck plus our car and our ute. I said to the two neighbours, "You better come up to our place because we're up high and it's a big mound that we built. There's a lot of room there." They brought their cars up and they came and stayed with us. There was myself, my wife and my grandson. He had two cats. My wife had a little dog and I had two barn cats. They were all in pens. One of the neighbours had a cat and a dog and the other neighbour was an elderly lady in her 70s. Anyway, we thought we were fairly prepared.

On Monday evening we got a text saying to evacuate. By that time the water was over the roads—probably a metre, far too high to travel through. We felt fairly secure in the house and didn't think we were going to get flooded. About eight o'clock that night the water was rising up around the 1974 flood level. And by 11 o'clock that night it started coming in our home and about two o'clock in the morning everybody was getting very uncomfortable with water rising and it was up around our knees. We thought we'd ring the SES. So we did. They said, "We can't do anything until daylight." So the first signs of daylight in the morning I rang the SES and they said, "We have 700 people to evacuate. We'll prioritise who we pick up and we can't tell you when you'll be picked up."

I rang a neighbour—he's an old sea captain—and he said, "I'll be over there. Just wait till I get my boat sorted." He came over with the boat towing another boat and, unbeknownst to me, a neighbour that was closer to Woodburn—they got rescued and they said to the chap in the boat that they had better go and see how we are getting on. And they came down in the boat too. By the time we got out—my wife's only a shorty but the water was up to her chin and we got a floaty out of the pool and she was in that. It's pretty hard to get in a boat when the boat's up so high and you're so low. We managed to get the slippery dip, which had a ladder on it, and we managed to get everybody in the boats. When we left it was pretty dangerous to go under the power lines because they were so low to the water so we went round the back of all the farms.

When we got to Wardell, the SES at the bridge said, "The water's still rising. We can't get you off here. You'll have to go to the public school." So we all went there. During that day, anybody who had elderly people—my wife's got a breathing problem—they took them in a boat to Evans Head. My grandson and I got picked up in a boat in the afternoon. The depth sounder on the boat was saying seven metres water. We were going over the top of cars, and you could see the cars and the utes through the water. We stayed out at Evans Head until we could get back on the roads. We had a friend up at Lismore Heights. He let us stay in his university accommodation. We got back on the farm probably in about 10 days' time. We found the water had kept rising after we'd left it because it went up to the top of my head. We were just absolutely amazed that it went that high. It covered all the machinery, and all the cars were all completely submerged.

But one of the problems that carries on from that is the fact that it stayed over the top of our cane. We had one-year-old cane. We grow cane for two years. The one-year-old crops stood under the water so long that they died. So the income for 2023-24 has gone, because that is our income. Then, to replant, you have to plant a

young cane, which is one year old. All that is dead. I'm just speaking as one cane farmer. There are lots of cane farmers who are the same. So it's going to be a very financially difficult time to go through 2023 and 2024. That's all, thanks.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, sir. We will be taking some evidence from cane farmers immediately after this. Thank you for your time. We will have Mr Richard Crandon, Wayne Crawford and then Bronwyn Magri.

**RICHARD CRANDON**, before the Committee: Thank you, Mr Chair, for the opportunity to be able to speak to you. My name is Richard Crandon. I am a chartered professional engineer. I was born in Lismore in 1944 and have experienced the majority of flooding. I now reside in Ballina. I retired to Ballina, and I reside at 55 Burns Point Ferry Road. I fully experienced the problems of flooding in early March—first and second—and sat through the flood problems. I am very fortunate; I have flood insurance, and I am being looked after very well by my insurance company. I do not have any major problems as far as rectification of my house. We are having one difficulty, and that is being able to get stable prices to do the work. As you are probably aware, we have limited trades in my area.

I speak from my 30 or 40 years as a consulting engineer in this area. Our major problem is not having the trades and not having a lot of the materials that are necessary for the rectification and restoration works that are urgently required. I could spend another six hours of this Committee hearing talking about that. But the situation there now—I sense it from my observations and speaking to a number of my old builder clients—is a certain greed factor is coming into the element. As a typical example, prior to March this year, to put down a square metre of tiling, you would be paying in the order of \$60 to \$65 a square metre. Today's rate is in excess of \$100. If you want a tradesman, you pay for it. Also in my retirement, I have become a virtual—you might use the term "professional Rotarian". I am caught up with the community. I am servicing the hubs, and I can see a lot of people out there stressing.

We have a major problem coming on our hands now with people who have no moneys. Their houses have been condemned, and they have no direction. I sense it's going to take something in the order of five years to six years for these people to get themselves stabilised again. It's not going to be a fast process. There's no magic bullet for this problem. It's going to take a long period of time to sort. I've also had the opportunity to study what Ballina Shire Council is putting forward for their flood mitigation. I've been caught up in flood mitigation in two places. I have been in very close coordination with council. They have their flood mitigation program there, which has been lodged. I do recommend that this panel gives serious thought to funding it and getting something done because Ballina now has a major problem; it has the stigma of that of a flood town. It has never had it in the past—just local flooding—and now we have a flood problem.

My residence was valued at \$1.6 million prior to the flood. I would say I would be lucky to get half that now. So you can see—I am a retiree, and it's been a major blow. But, again, I'm not complaining because I'm fortunate to have good insurance cover. But I don't know whether I'm going to get insurance cover next year. That's the problem we've got, and it has got to be addressed. Somewhere the Government has to step in and ensure that we have got insurance policies next year. Look at the problem in Lismore—no insurance. It has created havoc and stress. I've been a Lismore man. I grew up in Lismore, and I lived through all the floods there. The flooding was somewhat of a—you can't say a social event. But it was there and gone in three days, and everyone is back to normal and we would have our flood sales. It worked very well. We could handle floods. We'd spray the place out with all the disinfectants and we'd get back to work. But this last flood went well in excess of the one-in-100-year prediction and of the 1974 flood.

I witnessed the 1974 flood. I was a trainee at the shire at the time. I was fully aware of what was going on because I was working with SES and I had the local knowledge of north of Lismore. Guess where all the flooding came from? North of Lismore. So I'm fully aware of the problems that are associated with the hydraulic gradients from Nimbin to Lismore, from Repentance Creek to Lismore and all those valleys. The situation, as I see it, is in the sixties and seventies we had an organisation called public works department and we had flood mitigation councils that looked after all of this. That's all gone.

It's now an adjunct of a council, or it's an adjunct with three other organisations and put down the list. We have a lady here who's saying that their flood drains through—their drainage societies and that are non-existent. It was all built back in the sixties and the fifties. I was part of that. It's never been maintained. No money—that's what it gets down to. We've got to start looking at it very closely. I am hoping this panel will take it back to the upper House and start to thump the tables because we've had a gutful of it. I've seen the damage. It's not going to go away. We've seen climate change. We've seen the excessive climate. It's not going to go away. We have had this major flood. It's a one-in-500-year flood, never dreamed of in the engineering world and we've had it, and we're going to have it again.

**Mr WAYNE CRAWFORD**, before the Committee: Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. I wasn't expecting to speak here this afternoon. I walked through the door and then the opportunity was presented to me. Thank you to that young lady. I'm a resident of Ballina, have been for 32 years; moved up here from Sydney. I'm also a member of the Rotary Club of Ballina on Richmond. From day one of this flood, we became very active. We were in the likes of our town, Ballina, Wardell, Broadwater. I don't know how many sausages we cooked, but I reckon we could have just about circumnavigated Ballina with the amount. So we've been very active as far as a Rotary club is concerned.

Because we were seeing that we were boots on the ground and we were going to be straight into it, over this period of time, from the flood to, I suppose, about three weeks ago, four weeks ago, our club has been given the responsibility from private money to get out into the community with \$700,000. We've started doing that. We have been doing that for some time in the form of vouchers. These are vouchers we have made up, which we have purchased from local businesses. They're a pack of \$500 worth of vouchers. We started off by knocking on doors because there was no other communication. We've just about finished Ballina. We're going to try and get out to the likes of Wardell—we've done some—and then further on, to Broadwater.

The thing that has become very, very evident—we've just being doing vouchers today again—is that, when you knock on somebody's door, if they are home, they greet you and you can't help but see the despair in their eyes. These people have been terribly affected. They've been affected, from youngsters who—thankfully or hopefully—will have the chance to rebuild and go on. But we've come across 70- and 80-year-old people, very staunch, not really wanting any help. But, by God, they need it. What you see in their eyes is, "I don't know what I'm going to do." Those who've got family in the area are very, very lucky. They can move in. They are still in a state of despair, but they can move in. There are so many who don't have that luxury.

We'll continue to give our money out. We'll continue to support our community. We'll continue to look at the eyes of these poor devils who have been affected. But I don't want to have to, in 12 months' time, go back to them and say, "Where are you up to?" and they say, "Well, nothing's happened." Richard mentioned that there's a lack of trades in the area. A lot of these people can't afford it, anyway. But if, in 12 months' time, we come back and we see these people and they say nothing's been done, well, damn the New South Wales Government, because that is where it has to be. The red tape has to stop. They're fellow Australians out there, and they're counting on you. They're very resilient. But, by God, they're hurting. Thank you.

**Ms BRONWYN MAGRI**, before the Committee: I wasn't intending to speak tonight. I'm a resident of West Ballina. I live behind Bunnings. We have never had water in our street. In the 2017 Lismore flood, I think it reached my letterbox. So when we got the SES warning on the first flood, we were like, "Okay." But then the water started to creep up and creep up. We put the sandbags in place. My husband and I drove out at 7 o'clock at night, in the pitch-black dark, with our two dogs in the back, and went up to the lighthouse and slept at the lighthouse with the 50 or 60 other cars that were there, with no water. None of us knew what to do. I was very fortunate. I put a Facebook call out, and a fellow nurse gave me a place to stay, which I stayed at, I thought, for one night, but it ended up being 17 days, 17 nights. We returned to our home. We slept on airbeds. In fact, only last week we replaced my son's airbed with a mattress. So he now has a mattress to sleep on. Woo hoo!

What I actually want to talk about is the impact it has had on my community just in my little street. They have a thing called Make Safe. They're going to come to your house and "make it safe". We all, in our naivety, thought that meant make it safe for us to live in. What it actually means is they're going to rip out your walls, they're going to rip out your shower, they're going to rip out your toilet and you have nowhere to be. So my neighbour on the corner, who ran her family day care from her house, is now sleeping in her back porch with her 19-year-old son and has been given some doonas. That is where she's sleeping. Her 70-year-old parents have hired a caravan to sleep in in their front yard. My neighbour next door, she had her make-safe done and came back home to Make Safe and realised she actually didn't have a place she could live in and is lucky enough to have a daughter to live with.

My husband and I have not had our house made safe yet. We're living in our house. Its walls are still intact. We don't actually have anywhere to go because I need to be within a certain distance of the hospital. I have two border collies. There isn't really accommodation. So at the moment my house is not made safe. My son will move away very soon because he doesn't want to live in that environment anymore. My neighbour two doors up from us are actually making their own house safe because they don't have insurance. This is one street—one street—in West Ballina that I can rattle those stories off for. It expands out so far. We have so many elderly neighbours that my husband, when he walks the dogs, touches base with, that are living in these environments with no walls and no water or one power point.

This is Ballina. This is not Lismore. This is Ballina. We have been a little bit put behind. I'm okay about that because Lismore has been really affected. But we have no community hub. We have no community

connection, I suppose, in our environment. That has left a lot of our elderly very, very vulnerable. When it first occurred, we had people. I just opened my doors. I had strangers walk in and rip things up. There was one man from East Ballina. I'd never met him, will probably never meet him again. He came and ripped things up for me and left. I thank him, whoever he is. But this concept of people having their homes made safe has actually left my community and my friends in Lismore who have had their houses made safe and have no insurance very, very vulnerable. I think that needs to be cleared up. People need to be really made aware of what that means to them. They won't have walls. They won't have a toilet. They won't have a shower. They won't have a kitchen. That is what my neighbourhood, my friends in Lismore and my fellow nurses have been left with from this flood. That is going to go on for maybe six months to a year, or maybe two years. Insurance companies denied claims after being made safe, so now they have to fund it themselves. That is what we are living with. That is all I have to say.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, everyone.

**Public forum concluded.**

**Mr DENNIS BOLAND**, Canegrower, affirmed and examined

**Mr JOHN CLARKE**, Canegrower, sworn and examined

**Mr GEOFF PYE**, Chairman, Richmond River Cane Growers Association, affirmed and examined

**The CHAIR:** Gentlemen, under our rules you are eligible to make a short statement of a couple of minutes and then we will ask you questions.

**JOHN CLARKE:** I would like to say that I have been a canefarmer for over 30 years. I grew up in the East Coraki area. Our family has been in that area since 1860, so I am quite well aware of what happens in the area flood-wise. That will do me. Thank you.

**GEOFF PYE:** I will give you my background. I am on a family farm that is an original selection. I have now been on that farm for the last 35 years. I first came to that farm back in 1986 and, in the next three years, experienced seven floods. None of them came even close to this event that has just taken place. We are all pretty on the ball as far as flooding goes, but this was an absolutely catastrophic event. We really do need assistance because in the cane-growing area—I know all our members and 90 per cent of them haven't got a home to live in, so we are in dire straits. We are also going to need a lot of assistance to get ourselves back on our feet. We think we've got a great industry, but we are really going to need some government support to get us back on our feet.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Pye, I will get right down to it. We make recommendations to the Government. You talked about assistance. How would you like that assistance? Which shape would you like it to be in? Could you please detail that? After that I will let my colleagues ask some questions.

**GEOFF PYE:** I am going to give you an outline of the industry here and the good things we do and how you could assist us. The New South Wales sugar industry has cultivated 33,000 hectares of the land on the Tweed, Richmond and Clarence floodplains for the last 150 years. Some 11,000 hectares are cultivated on the Richmond by 111 farmers. The three mills and one refinery support 457 farming families and 2,500 jobs in associated fields. We are a big employer in the region. We also supply fuel to two cogeneration plants that supply half of the North Coast's electricity needs. The New South Wales sugar industry is partnering with other industries to make the Northern Rivers a carbon neutral zone. Sugarcane remains the world's fastest producer of biomass. No other plant comes close to it. Above the ground, Richmond sugarcane captures up to 5.5 tonnes of carbon per hectare per year. The amount sequestered in the soil is being determined but could be as much as what happens above ground.

Research has also shown that sugarcane provides huge amounts of stable carbon phytoliths—that is like a carbon stone—and that can remain in the ground for up to a thousand years. Sugarcane remains the most suitable, resilient and productive crop to grow on tropical and subtropical floodplains. Planting and harvesting are the two largest and most critical operations in the production cycle, being both labour and capital intensive. Harvesting is organised and completed by harvesting cooperatives, independent of the grower, so it is all controlled. Planting is completed by individual large growers, combined farmer groups and private contractors, and is an economic and logistic concern for growers. Compounding grower stress is the small window for planting in September and October, and wait times for contractors in past seasons has seen smaller farms left unplanted. The February-March floods have displaced many growers, particularly on the Richmond. The priority is to repair residences and have these growers return home.

Harvesting the 2022 crop will provide growers with a delivery price, which has been reduced, and cashflow from the mill when the cane is crushed. That will allow them to pay for the harvest and give them operating cash. In these exceptional circumstances, this additional cash will be used to repair flood-damaged residences—the immediate priority for displaced farmers. We are not getting cane back in the ground; we are looking to get our homes back. What we are wanting is planting moneys diverted for flood recovery. There is a good chance that plantings will be significantly reduced this year. The flow-on effect will be decreased future mill throughput and reduced quantities of biofuel for the cogeneration. This proposal will complete the 2022 plant, securing throughput for the mills and fuel for cogeneration refinery. The proposal will also build resilience into the planting operation by maximising efficiency of medium-sized planting operations, allowing them to plant more cane—for example, with neighbours and on close-by fields—it will eliminate waiting times for planting and the possibility of people missing out.

I have a five-point plan. We canegrowers are very proactive and we like to see that we are coming up with solutions, rather than whingeing about stuff. We will whinge about stuff but then we will tell you how we reckon we need to fix it. People have been talking about flooding. It is amazing the community support that farmers have got now that water has gone through their homes as well. So, what canegrowers would like to see in relation to floods and flood mitigation. I have five points here and I will elaborate on each point: re-establishment



of a single, well-funded flood mitigation authority; removal of complex and conflicted legislation and intergovernmental agency conflict that prevents flood mitigation works and processes; restoration of rural flood mitigation infrastructure to its design state; regular and ongoing maintenance to flood mitigation infrastructure; and removal of flow obstructions in rivers and flood escape options.

See, Penny? I told you: Flood, flood, flood; drainage, drainage, drainage. Number one: Re-establishment of a single, well-funded flood mitigation authority with a mandate to get works done. Richmond River County Council was established in 1959 after the 1954 flood. Since amalgamated and now known as Rous County Council, the renaming of it bespeaks its loss of identity. In the first 30 years it was well staffed, well funded and operated efficiently and effectively. Since the late 1990s its importance as the lead agency has been taken away by local councils' interference for government agencies and lack of funding. Confusions and battle for importance by other government agencies has left no-one in charge.

Point 2: Removal of complex and conflicted legislation and intergovernmental agency conflict that prevents flood mitigation works and processes. All attempts to navigate these complex rules, regulations and policies to complete widespread flood mitigation maintenance has failed. There are seven government departments having jurisdiction over land, water, vegetation, surrounding flood mitigation infrastructure, local councils, RMS, NSW Fisheries, fish and vegetation, NSW Parks and Wildlife, marine mammals and reptiles, Crown Lands, DPI and NSW Maritime. It's a bloody nightmare.

**The CHAIR:** Excuse me, Mr Pye, is that part of a written submission that you have made to the Committee?

**GEOFF PYE:** No. I've got a copy of it for you.

**The CHAIR:** If you could table that for us, that would be good.

**GEOFF PYE:** I would just like to say that, as the cane growers, we have been battling this stuff for years. It's no new news to me. Any of these authorities can veto works by the flood mitigation authority. NSW Fisheries is most obstructive and uses MEMS, which is the Marine Estate Management, as its preventative tool. The current situation is known within our local community as *Yes Minister* on steroids.

Point 3: Restoration of rural flood mitigation infrastructure to its design state. There is no ongoing plan for upgrading or maintaining flood mitigation infrastructure. Farmers want restoration upgrading of this critical infrastructure as a matter of urgency. NSW Fisheries want it removed and the flood plain returned to a swamp. On-ground works have been replaced by thousands of costly studies, modelling done by a range of government agencies without coordination and with little benefit to farmers or rural communities. Flood mitigation has become a cash cow for universities and private consultants at the expense of farmers.

Point 4: Regular and ongoing maintenance of flood mitigation infrastructure. Regular maintenance of Government-owned flood drain outlets ceased in 1996. Conflicted legislation and overreach by public servants has stalled on-ground maintenance works. There is no plan to restart it as a regular schedule, nor any idea of who is responsible or who will do the work. Clogged outlets, cracked pipes, crumbling headwalls and failing levies are flooding agricultural lands after major rain events. Neither the funding nor the political will is there to do this work.

Point 5: Removal of flow obstructions to the river and to flood escape options. These are our solutions to what has gone on: reinstate regular channel dredging of the lower reaches of the river that ceased in 1974; increase the number of floodways under the new Pacific Motorway as initially recommended by the independent engineers and ignored by the RMS; replace the fixed weir in the Tuckombil Canal with a lay-flat or vertical lift structure, as initially recommended by the community; and cut a permanent gated opening to the sea at Boundary Creek—or it could be a canal or a piped area out to the sea—to relieve flooding.

**The CHAIR:** If you table that document or provide it to the Committee we will incorporate it.

**The Hon. MARK BANASIAK:** I acknowledge and thank John for allowing the Committee to visit his property today to see the operations there. Can you flesh out the importance of getting the increased throughput at the mills and how that links to the importance of the plant subsidies that you need?

**GEOFF PYE:** The mill—I don't know what the figure is but it used to be like \$7 million just to turn the on switch, so you have got to have a certain amount of cane to go through it. The optimum is maybe 800,000 tonnes a year. We are looking at it is going to be around 500,000. Next year we might be pushing to be 250,000 tonnes because, as you have seen, most of the two-year-old crop survived but the year-old crops have been severely damaged. There is going to be a lot less cane next year. If we can get a lot of plants into the ground we might be able to cut a fair lot of year-old cane that is healthy for the next year, and then definitely in 2024 that cane will be on-grown. We know we are going to have a tough year next year where it is a bit hard to get out of,

but we might be able to cut a bit of year-old. But definitely the year after, if we can get plants in the ground, we will be up and running again. People will have their cashflow, the mill will have their throughput and the co-generation plants will also have the fuel to be producing that green power, which, like I said, powers half the North Coast.

**The Hon. MARK BANASIAK:** Picking up on one point that you made about the drains and the bureaucracy that is holding that up, you mentioned MEMS.

**GEOFF PYE:** Yes.

**The Hon. MARK BANASIAK:** Is it the Cape Byron Marine Park? Is that the justification for—

**GEOFF PYE:** No. It's the Marine Estate Management—the whole east coast of New South Wales.

**The Hon. MARK BANASIAK:** They are not specifically—

**GEOFF PYE:** The Richmond is the trial plot, because they ascertained that the Richmond was the worst river on the east coast. Everything is centred around the coastal flood plain, whereas when I went to school water ran downhill and that's where all the floodwater came from, out of the hills. A lot of the degradation is coming out of those once rainforest areas, running down onto the flood plain. Why hold water back behind these degraded flood channels? The flood channels are perfect to the river, but that's where Fisheries are holding it up. They will not do any work where the drains are. They are quite happy for that water to stay in there, get stagnant and rotten, ruin crops, and then when eventually it does come out it's de-oxygenated and, whatever.

**JOHN CLARKE:** Causes fish kills.

**GEOFF PYE:** And causes fish kills. Why wouldn't you just get it out while it is fresh? It just—you know.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** The \$75,000 grants that the State Government has given out, that is for work you have already done on your property, but I understand it has to be done by a third party. You can't invoice yourself for work you have done on your property.

**GEOFF PYE:** No, you can't. That's the rules.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Can you touch on what that means and the impact that has? How would you rather see that system work?

**GEOFF PYE:** We would rather have it so that we could get the money up-front, then do the work and provide the receipts, because, as you could imagine, cashflow is very short at the moment. Like I said before, a lot of people are wanting to fix their homes first, so any money that you have got saved up—so many people have got nowhere to live. That's the problem. Also, because of the constant wet weather, no-one can do any work anyway. Honestly, I have driven around my farm twice on a quad bike and nearly didn't make it back, it's that wet.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** I would imagine that you could do some of that work yourself and it would be more cost effective.

**GEOFF PYE:** It would, yes. But legally we can't do that; we can't charge our time out. And I imagine it is very hard to police.

**JOHN CLARKE:** I can understand the reason why the rules are set up because it could be wasted. Then there are different size farms that need different amounts of money. If they were given \$75,000, to collect it back if they didn't spend it properly could be a pitfall. But one of the things is that a lot of our farming stuff is small; there's a bit here and a bit there. By the time if you got a contractor to do bits and pieces—like mine is spread around in five different blocks with about an eight-kilometre distance between them from end to end. If we could have money to do stuff and maybe even employees and extras that we get that we can spend the money in a fashion that we could make go much further with it. Rather than—they were talking about the tiles, how much a tile was from previous to now. That's the same with buying gravel or getting trucks or machinery. It's hard to get and it's got expensive. There's a lot of price gouging in the whole system and that type of thing going on. There's a lot of area to be covered.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Clarke and Mr Pye, we have a question from my colleague Ms Sue Higginson.

**Ms SUE HIGGINSON:** Thank you, Chair. I know that the maintenance of the drains would have significant impacts on water quality, et cetera. Do we know, have we seen or can we predict whether that would in fact have made—if they had been maintained and they were in better quality, opened, et cetera—

**GEOFF PYE:** The flooding would have been less?

**Ms SUE HIGGINSON:** Yes, at the 14.6-metre flood that we've just had in Lismore. Do we think that it would have had—

**GEOFF PYE:** It wouldn't have had an effect in Lismore, but downriver definitely the Tuckombil Canal, with that block in it, it—

**JOHN CLARKE:** It holds back water.

**GEOFF PYE:** Yes, it holds back water. The early water could have got away. If it had dropped the flood level by 300 ml it wouldn't have gone through my house—and that would have been in a lot of houses that are normally safe.

**JOHN CLARKE:** Part of what you're talking about is, okay, we've got the flood, it's there and it's hit a height that we've never seen before, but everything is left blocked and closed. It's the after-effects of drainage that you're looking at. It's like the lady was talking about her pond: it kept it away and then it ran out later. This is what happens. It's all blocked up, it's all full, the water stays in there, and it becomes more stagnant and more stationary. The whole system is not working correctly because of neglect.

**DENNIS BOLAND:** I made a big written submission. You would have that. This flood—I'm on the lower bits just below Woodburn. I've been there 89 years. My family has been there since 1866. The biggest flood on record—there were big ones in the 1890s. My grandmother was in the house and it never got in the house. In '54 it got about a foot in the house. I built my new house on a mound, 600 ml above '54; then there's two bricks and then you get up. This one went over a metre in my house. There was nothing like it. I'm on the lower end and it just never got away. The highway, the new road has to have something to do with it. But I've written in my submission that in the '54 flood my brother paddled in on a surf ski from Evans Head—not far—and paddled back to Salty Lakes, as they call it. He said you could have kicked the water into Salty Lakes with your foot. Now, this is nearly two metres higher, and as far as I know it never got near it.

Since '54, all that heath area has been sand-mined and would not have been levelled out or whatever when they finished. It was open heath in my day. I drove a jeep over half of it, probably illegally. Now you couldn't ride a horse over it, hardly. It is trees that they made them plant. They would have planted anything—that's not my say. But for some reason the water could not get away. In years gone by they would broadcast on the wireless, "Flood levels at such and such a creek" here, there and everywhere, and they would have an estimate every hour. The big flood that hit Lismore two years ago, I sat on the verandah and worked out it would be about 1945. That was down to the road, nothing much—"It might get into these shops in Woodburn." It flooded Lismore out.

This one, we were sitting watching TV. We always eat late. At eight o'clock we had tea. I said to Mother, "This won't be too bad, by the sound of it. Lismore's going to cop a caning. It'll probably be about 1945." That would be eight o'clock. At 10 o'clock my daughter arrived from the old house and said, "We're going to have to get out. Dad, pack up and"—"Oh," I said, "it might get somewhere near it." At 10 o'clock she said, "It's up on the lawn." Jude, her daughter, rang the SES. Some of the local people got us out about eight the next morning and it was a foot in the house then—but running terribly strong. The water never ran there before. The water always rose and just sort of drifted for two or three days. This flood was nothing like it, and the water just could not get away for whatever reason. That's why it was so big and so bad. There's still water on a lot of my place.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you Mr Boland, Mr Clarke and Mr Pye. Mr Clarke, thank you for having us at your farm today. Thank you for sharing your time with us. You provided the five-point plan to the secretariat, is that correct?

**GEOFF PYE:** Yes.

**Ms SUE HIGGINSON:** Is Mr Boland's submission—

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Yes, we have got it.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** We have chatted a lot about the flood drains. They're not something I'm familiar with, sorry. Given the equipment and knowledge that farmers have and the interest in keeping them clear, who do we think is best placed to manage it and keep them clean? If it was to be farmers, could concerns about the other impacts be managed through ways that you can see—through codes or whatever—to manage those other risks?

**GEOFF PYE:** We have actually got an acid sulphate plan for our cane farms. Everyone is regulated—we're self-regulated. We fill out a map on where all our drains are. We know where our acid hazards are and how deep they are, so we have all shallowed all our drains, et cetera, like that. But we can do all that—the Fisheries guys didn't like the fact that we got self-regulation, and that's where a lot of this drainage stuff is coming from.

They got their noses out of joint that we had our self-regulation and they wanted to control us. They can control us, all right: right at the floodgate at the river. A lot of it is just that: It's bad blood.

**JOHN CLARKE:** It's audited by the council so it's not a free-range thing.

**GEOFF PYE:** Yes, it's audited.

**JOHN CLARKE:** If we do any major thing, we have to have it approved and we have a schedule that allows what to do and that. Actually, a lot of the farming practices that were done in the past, we've shallowed drains and we've done laser levelling and other land improvement things that help all that problem that Fisheries perceive is causing them the problems.

**GEOFF PYE:** An example: Honestly, for not a lot of money we could go right along the river and clean all those drains out—get the spoil, put it in special spots, put lime on it and get it right. Rous County Council actually did three drains, but only tiny little things on the edge of the road. Just to do the paperwork to get the permits is \$24,000 for three little scoop drains, then another \$24,000 to concrete the whole things into the river the distance from me to you. It is ridiculous, whereas you could have got an excavator in there, scooped it out, put it in a pile—it's an abundant thing—put lime on it, left it for a year and got rid of the dirt elsewhere. It is just complete overreach of bureaucracy. It does my head in. Like I said, we've been doing this since 1996. It is unbelievable. Someone needs to just step in, push them out of the road and let's get the job done. Even the residents of these areas now are complaining about exactly the same thing. It's not just the farmers. In a way it has been good there's been a bloody big flood because now everyone realises what we've been going through for so long.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** I wanted to ask about the sugar mill. How many people does it employ and what's the prognosis?

**GEOFF PYE:** I'm not sure how many in the Broadwater mill, but I think there's directly 2½ thousand people in the whole sugar industry between the three mills and all the associated people. We're hoping to get going at Broadwater by 4 August. It's the co-generation plant and all the electrics in there that seems to be the stumbling block, just trying to get parts, et cetera, like that. What we're wanting to do is start our harvest when it dries out enough and start trucking cane to the other two mills just to at least get the harvest going. That's where we're also wanting assistance in the transport costs to get there, because otherwise we just won't get our harvest done. We just don't know how the mill is going to perform. It's been stripped right out, all the electrics and stuff like that—it's probably going to run like a hairy goat for the first month—and we're going to have contamination in cane, such as mud. When we're harvesting, there's just so much rubbish in the cane. That's one of the huge things; we need help there. We're being told by the DPI that it's not our rubbish and that the EPA are meant to look after it.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** How will they identify whose rubbish it is?

**GEOFF PYE:** Well, it's not ours.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** No, I know.

**GEOFF PYE:** But DPI says they claim it. Honestly, when you burn the paddock of cane—they're in rows; they cut a row at a time—you're going to have to have someone there looking the whole time and dragging stuff out from in front of the harvester. You have to employ at least another one or two.

**JOHN CLARKE:** We had a meeting this afternoon, before this, of our harvesting co-op for our projected price for harvesting next year. I think we were \$8 last year, and now we're \$10. That's if the cane that is predicted to be there is there, and if it gets any worse, it could go to \$12. That's partially—there's a 50c rise in the inflation part of the thing, and then there's also \$1 a litre more for fuel. On top of this, there'll be re-establishment costs. I spoke earlier about the price of fertiliser being more than the \$1,000 a tonne that it was last year—the regular-type price.

**GEOFF PYE:** Yes, \$2,000 more.

**JOHN CLARKE:** And then we've got all the inflation on top of it. We've got extra work to do in cleaning. It's just carnage, as I described it—not as a disaster, but everything's just a mess.

**DENNIS BOLAND:** The harvesters will also pick up a lot more rubbish and a lot more damage to the harvesters.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** I guess where I'm going with this is just to try to get the economic significance of your industry in terms of the employment and in terms of its local economy. I wonder if an industry-specific package is warranted.

**JOHN CLARKE:** We could supply that through our—the mill CEOs and things could get all that material easily. The office is here in Ballina. It'd be the chief accountants here and the CEOs here.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** That would be really helpful.

**JOHN CLARKE:** You could go down and sit down with them if you wanted to.

**GEOFF PYE:** I think we're worth about \$200 million a year.

**The CHAIR:** Catherine, I'm just mindful of using their resources and things like that at this time. I'm really worried about using their resources collecting data for us that we, in fact, have a good sense from DPI about. I just don't want to divert their resources onto collecting material for us.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** No, it's only stuff they already have.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** We have another session yet, Catherine, as well.

**The CHAIR:** Gentlemen, can you make one last summation point?

**GEOFF PYE:** As canegrowers, we like to keep ourselves away from the mill. Even though we are 50 per cent owners of the mill, we're our own people.

**JOHN CLARKE:** We run our own show.

**GEOFF PYE:** And we run our own show. The mill has their bit. They can go and look at their transport and stuff like that, and if they need assistance, but our growers need assistance.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Sure. I just want this industry to survive.

**GEOFF PYE:** I know. That's why I went through that stuff in the submission before. We've got a great story to tell. We probably don't advertise ourselves well enough. Honestly, we tick all the boxes. We probably visually don't look all that great, because we burn our cane and there's the cane ash. We're just a visible industry but really, in the end, there is no waste. It's a really good story.

**JOHN CLARKE:** We're a lot cleaner than a lot of other industries around that look a lot better.

**The CHAIR:** Okay, gentlemen. On that note, I thank you for your time. I thank you for sharing your experiences with us and allowing us to come to your property. We'll consider what you've said.

**GEOFF PYE:** Thank you. If you've got any questions, just call me.

**(The witnesses withdrew.)**

**Mr KEVIN LEWIS**, Principal, Xavier Catholic College, sworn and examined

**The CHAIR:** Mr Lewis, thank you for your time. You can make a short opening statement of two to three minutes if you wish, just giving us a bit of context, and then we'll ask you a few questions.

**KEVIN LEWIS:** Sure. I've written some notes, if that's okay.

**The CHAIR:** That's very good.

**KEVIN LEWIS:** It's my assumption that you wanted to hear about our unique experience as a facility in Ballina as a result of the floods.

**The CHAIR:** Yes, sir.

**KEVIN LEWIS:** I've laid it out day by day. I hope it doesn't go for too long, but I just wanted to let you get a feel for how events played out for our college. On Monday 28 February my role as the chair of a committee that I was hosting and conducting via Zoom was continually interrupted by callouts from my staff as the flood event moved downstream from Lismore to Ballina. Throughout the day it was clear to me that the events in Lismore and the unprecedented water levels were clearly going to cause significant problems downstream here in Ballina, so we made preparations for the college community to provide limited supervision for our students the following day. This situation enables parents to make a choice to keep the children home and for staff to keep themselves safe where there might be danger.

The night unfolded with harrowing reports of evacuations, lack of coordinated support and personal tragedies all over the news media. By the time I woke up on Tuesday 1 March and checked my phone, there was a Facebook post requesting new evacuation centres to support those displaced, and a principal colleague of mine mentioned my name in one of those posts and suggested that perhaps Xavier College might be seconded into that effort. Never having been part of a flood relief effort before and therefore not knowing about any procedural requirements, I responded that we'd be happy to do this. Throughout the day small numbers of people started arriving, and we were happy to help.

Also that morning I took a text message from my assistant principal Mrs Amanda Falvey, who had been contacted by someone at SES to request the use of our school buses to transport SES crews and displaced families. I took the contact number, called them back and put our buses into action. I immediately went into the college, picked up one of those buses and headed to the SES headquarters to assist. Throughout the day, I and other staff members ferried crews and families to evacuation centres and other locations as directed. By the end of the day about 20 people had gathered at our college, based on a Grapevine notification that we were open to assist with evacuees. My last task on that day was to drop some families to the sport and rec centre at Lake Ainsworth, and it was here that I overheard that there was a delay there because their official certification to be an evac centre was not yet complete. It got me thinking, "We don't have any certification at my college".

**The CHAIR:** Oops! Sorry.

**KEVIN LEWIS:** I found it amusing too. I concluded my drop-off and returned to the SES base to discuss this with the leading hand there, whose name I don't recall, I'm sorry. I related what was unfolding at Xavier College and she told me that, because we weren't officially approved, we had to disperse the families to properly certified locations. It was not an easy message to give, but it was done, and my two APs and I headed home to our own homes. Not five minutes after arriving home, I got a call from the Department of Communities and Justice representative—I think Tony O'Brien is his name, but I'll stand corrected if I'm wrong—requesting that we reopen Xavier College. I indicated I had spoken to our Catholic Schools office in Lismore, that all of our staff were sent home and that families had been relocated. We couldn't open up again. He pleaded and indicated that all necessary documentation was being completed on our behalf, so what could I do? We reopened.

No sooner had I returned to the college and opened the gates to start receiving people than bus after bus started arriving. Cherry Street bowlo and the Richmond Room were in danger of going underwater. Then I was notified that the hospital needed to evacuate as well, and Xavier needed to provide a space for this to happen. We allocated the bottom floor of our college, Magis Hall. By way of explanation, "magis" is a Jesuit term or a Jesuit school which means "to do more and be more in the service of the community"—quite fitting in the circumstances. I watched in amazement as between the hours of 9.00 p.m. and 1.00 a.m. the following morning, with the help of our college senior students and staff, the bottom floor of our hall transformed into a fully functioning field hospital.

Separate from this, our other college facilities quickly started filling up with block after block needing to be opened up to accommodate more and more families. We had two nursing homes at the college, Crowley and St Andrews; at least two high-needs dependency units for disability services; independent living aged persons without carers and support; and, of course, the general population, including the homeless. All told, we believe

we had up to 700 people at any one time and possibly 1,000 through, and more if you count Holy Family primary school next door—all of which seemed to be coordinated by just one person on site at the outset. I believe her name was Meg Valentine but, again, I'll stand corrected if I'm wrong. She seemed totally exhausted on that Tuesday night and Wednesday morning after helping set up similar evacuation sites in and around Lismore and she was looking for relief and it didn't appear to be coming anytime soon.

By Wednesday I rang Murray Deeps, who is the principal at Holy Family school, and told him that he needed to open up. We couldn't take all of these people on our own and he did so without hesitation. By this day, after more than 28 hours awake and continuously supporting, I went home to rest for a couple of hours. Medication and prescription support seemed to be now available and operating through the main hall but wasn't reaching everyone on our campus site. Red Cross was intermittently on site to ensure food donations were being allocated. Meg had been replaced by a new staff member in the hall. She had a couple of other team members who operated in that space but I don't recall them leaving to venture into the rest of the school to oversee the efforts. I hazard a guess that at the time they had no idea how many people we had on site and would not be able to support them with such a small team anyway.

My staff and family volunteers were feeding the enormous number of people here, including specialised meals for hospital staff and patients. Eventually lines in the local pizza place Quattro, among others, jumped in to help us out. My staff were toileting and washing aged-care people who had no support. They were deemed self-care patients and as such received no support that we could see, but they were on li-lo beds laying on the floor and couldn't get themselves up no matter how independent they were, so often they were lying in their own mess until we were able to get them up and shower them. My staff were acting as security until Murray and I arranged onsite support. My staff were registering names and contact details on the Red Cross site for evacuees with little or no guidance. We had no idea if we were doing it correctly or not. My staff were receiving donations and sorting and storing them. Our students provided respite for children of families with movie rooms, game rooms and outside play to allow parents to rest and recover.

My staff were using their own internet and data, limited as it was, and personal social media accounts in order to make communication because the Telstra service was so poor. Telstra arrived with a truck and booster equipment after we had packed up the hospital and all evacuees had gone. No-one seemed to be in charge. By Thursday throughout the day, as news of the waters receding in town emerged, Jenny Cleaver from Ballina hospital, who was helping coordinate their efforts, hinted they might be moving out the following day. I have to state that the hospital staff were amazing and so very grateful for the support that we offered them. We were similarly impressed by their efforts. A reporter from *The Australian* was on site and wrote what I thought was a less than accurate article about the events that took place. It was quite disappointing.

By the morning of Friday it was confirmed to us that the Ballina hospital would indeed return to its main site. They would be out by lunchtime. We'd also been made aware that the town was reopening—not by any official memo—and that many families were being permitted to return to their homes. Given this information, our Catholic Schools Office requested information on whether it was feasible to return to normal schooling the following week. I went to the primary school, where the Department of Communities and Justice were headquartered, across the road to discuss this with Murray. Together we spoke to the coordinating officer, who continually told us this would need to be referred up. We couldn't get a straight answer. It was very frustrating that we could not get a commitment or plan from the person in charge on the ground.

Rightly or wrongly, with some indication that the in-town facilities were being opened like the BISC and Southern Cross Public School, we informed those who needed to know that evacuees should be relocated so that we could become schools again. The job of relaying this message to the evacuees in our hall was less than personal and very cold. There was lots of disappointment and dismay directed back at the college because of it. Later that morning a representative of the Premier arrived to clear the way for him to visit the school. When he learned that the bulk of the evacuees had moved on and that the hospital was now returned to its proper site, he was not interested in the least about what we had experienced. He was quite dismissive of us and told us that the Premier was not coming up to visit schools. He needed to visit active sites. I felt so enraged and dismissed by his attitude. I was visited by another local politician on site and expressed my frustration about the arrogance of that person. I'm not sure what happened subsequently.

A replacement crew arrived from the Department of Communities and Justice, I think, and we found them a little confronting. One of my staff members was asked what credentials she had to be supporting evacuees. Confused, she asked for clarification. She was pressed further: "What title do you have as a support person?" She replied "GSD"—we get shit done. We felt alone and dismissed on so many fronts. It seemed as if the attitude was: They are a school; they know how to organise stuff; they can do it themselves. To date I've received letters of thanks from the acting CEO of North Coast local health district and from the Ballina hospital head of medicine by way of thanks. We've received dozens of letters and emails from evacuees on site who managed to return home.

Support and kind words came from surrounding schools, from our central office and other connections that we have further afield.

I have heard nothing that I recall to date officially from the Department of Communities and Justice. I confirmed this with Murray again today and neither has he. I received an online communication via one of our school apps from a Monique Bellamy, who I believe works for that department. I don't know what position she holds at Communities and Justice. Ironically, when the floodwater started rising again a few weeks later, the ADF turned up to do some reconnaissance at the potential of the college being used as a field hospital again. I was asked next time around what would I need the ADF to do. My response: everything. Because that's what we did. Costs incurred by the school for cleaning, relocating donated goods, disposing of worthless and unusable goods, and replacing equipment broken or gone missing had been borne by us. Our insurance doesn't cover this. Communication was poor or non-existent at times. Evacuees were in the dark, as were their family members. It was a harrowing experience.

**The CHAIR:** Sir, I'm going to take a bit of liberty here. On behalf of the Committee, I want to say thank you on behalf of the Parliament. Thank you for sharing that story and your experiences.

**The Hon. MARK BANASIAK:** On the end point, you talked about how none of the costs have been reimbursed. Being a former deputy principal, I know how important money is for students. Every dollar counts. Do you have a sense of how much you should be reimbursed or are owed?

**KEVIN LEWIS:** I can take the question on notice, because we've investigated a number of avenues. We've looked into our own insurances through Catholic Church Insurance, who insure all of the Catholic schools in the region. We've made representations to Communities and Justice, at this point to no avail, but that's only commencing because our insurance claims have been knocked back because we were taken over as a venue and not under our own, I suppose, governance at that point in time. So our insurances don't cover us for that. I will say to you that it's a disappointment to us that, in terms of the New South Wales Department of Education's response to flood-impacted schools, there was \$1,000 for individual staff members and \$500 for individual students to reimburse the costs associated with loss as a result of the flood to public schools only. Private Catholic schools were excluded from that. So whatever costs were incurred by our families and our staff is something that they have to wear themselves.

**The CHAIR:** I'll take another liberty. From the evidence that you have given to us, I think that even though your experiences were quite distressing, you would probably do it again to help the community, wouldn't you?

**KEVIN LEWIS:** My leadership team saw the defence forces come in a couple of weeks later when it looked like those floodwaters were rising, and the comment that came from one of them was, "Not again, Kevin." I said, "What do we do? We're members of the community and we need to support the community." Of course we would put our hands up to do that again. We would have recommendations on how that might be done better moving forward, and some pre-planning around that would be useful as a community—not just as a school, for Xavier College, but as an entire community. A cross-sectoral, cross-departmental response to that is necessary. I know the floodwaters were unprecedented and it's difficult to have been able to predict what might have happened as a result. But it has happened, so I think we need to be able to plan for it to happen again at some stage.

**The Hon. MARK BANASIAK:** I take the liberty of saying that you should never have had to investigate going through your own insurance. You should never have had to come to that.

**The Hon. ROD ROBERTS:** Thank you, Mr Lewis. I don't know if you can answer this question but I'll ask it anyway. When you got the initial shock—I'll call it that—"You can't take anybody because you're not certified," and then miraculously you were certified later on, what changed? Did anybody physically visit your site and do a checklist to certify you?

**KEVIN LEWIS:** My understanding, in the conversation on the phone with Tony O'Brien, was that it was being done on our behalf in some dark location. It was not made known to us. I don't recall—

**The Hon. ROD ROBERTS:** There was no physical inspection of your site or anything like that?

**KEVIN LEWIS:** No.

**The Hon. ROD ROBERTS:** So one minute you're not; next minute you are, all of a sudden.

**KEVIN LEWIS:** Yes, and I took it on trust that that had been done on our behalf.

**The Hon. ROD ROBERTS:** This is no reflection on you. The mere fact that you had to be certified in an emergency situation is just bewildering. That's why I wanted to tease out whether someone actually came out



physically to the site, had a look and said, "You've got fire escapes," and whatever it happens to be, "Everything is certified. Away you go." You don't even think that that happened?

**KEVIN LEWIS:** No. I will be highly complimentary to Meg, who I mentioned from the outset, who was there in the initial stages.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Is she from DCJ?

**KEVIN LEWIS:** I believe so, yes.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** She must be almost dead!

**KEVIN LEWIS:** She was very active on the site. She was in my office, in the lunchroom and working with my team. She was visiting various spaces around the school. She looked dead on her feet. She'd been doing a lot of work, as I understand it, over the preceding few days. When she was replaced, which I thought was a godsend for her, the same level of—I don't know whether "interest" is the right word—involvement in the entirety of the site of the school was lacking. They found their spot up on the top floor of our hall, where there was quite a number of people. But we probably had one-third of the evacuees on the top floor of our hall and another two-thirds were dispersed around the school. They were short-staffed. So they really didn't have capacity to be doing too much around the place anyway. They really didn't venture out of there.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** After all of this, how are your staff, your students and their families?

**KEVIN LEWIS:** I understand that our community was very much less impacted than those directly in the firing line at Lismore. We are acutely aware that many other people have been more seriously impacted than we have. But that doesn't diminish the impact that it has had on a number of our staff. There are probably three or four who are living in Mullumbimby and Broadwater who lost personal belongings, houses and all of that sort of stuff, and students as well. We draw from Evans Head, Woodburn and Mullumbimby as well. So we had quite a number of students who were impacted, some of whom are still recovering. But, of course, we didn't lose the entire school. We count ourselves lucky in that respect.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Just to follow up on your staff, given the fact that your staff had to step up and do personal care—it sounds like a very challenging story—are they able to access other support to debrief from all of that? I'm sure the school is trying to do that. But in the area of mental health support and those kinds of things, are you finding that you've got access to that?

**KEVIN LEWIS:** We have, yes. They turned up for Monday morning, ready to start teaching again. So they were back on the job. It was a herculean effort on Friday afternoon with our on-site cleaners and our kids getting in and sanitising and cleaning every piece of equipment in the school. We have two on-site cleaners, and they marshalled the entire school to get that place cleaned up and ready to go. There was some deep hygiene cleaning that needed to happen. We had lots of classrooms that had faeces and all sorts of stuff—dog droppings and whatever else—that we're still making claims for. But in terms of the school being able to be operational and open by Monday morning, we were. I can only give credit to my entire staff and the school community for that. It was just outstanding.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** My name is Catherine Cusack. I came to visit you at the school.

**KEVIN LEWIS:** It may well have been you who I referred to before.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** I requested you as a witness because I consider what you and your school did was heroic, and I feel like your experiences have a lot of lessons for government in the future. I wasn't aware of the Premier's interactions so that must have been somebody else, because I visited you while they were there.

**KEVIN LEWIS:** It may well have Sharon Cadwallader.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** As I understood it, there were 750 evacuees, including from Ballina hospital, in the high school, and another 250 across the road.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** What's across the road?

**KEVIN LEWIS:** Holy Family Primary School.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** So that's 1,000 evacuees, and that didn't count the nurses and doctors.

**KEVIN LEWIS:** Yes.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** The communications went down the same morning that Ballina hospital came in, and there was no information to you as to what was going on. That caused the school's internal communications to fail as well. So you were suddenly the person that everybody looked to because nobody could find a person from the Government—

**KEVIN LEWIS:** Yes.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** —who we later found in Holy Family.

**KEVIN LEWIS:** Okay.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** So you were the only person on site. Everybody was looking to you and you had no information, as I understand it. There were no instructions. When I arrived, you were wondering, "I've got all these gates open, the sun is setting and I need to secure the school." But you didn't know what the procedures were in relation to the centre. All of your staff were so calm and they were continuing to try to deal with every inquiry that came in, because nobody could report where they were. Families didn't know. Could you talk about that? What could have been done better?

**KEVIN LEWIS:** We were really operating on a clean slate. My comment that we felt the attitude of those who should have been in charge was, "They're a school and they know how to do things" actually played out to be somewhat true because we do know how to do things. We know how to organise large groups of people. We know how to get groups of people fed in an orderly way. We take kids away on camps and excursions and those sorts of things. Our office staff were wonderful in getting people registered and chasing them up throughout the day. Otherwise, I don't think that would have happened. So, yes, we called upon a lot of our own experiences as educators and carers. I think that word was key in the process too because pastoral care is a key to what we are about as a Catholic school. We like to think that we're not just about procedures and about delivering education.

Our modus operandi as teachers within that system of schools is to care for people. I suppose that just kicked in as a matter of course. The innate nature of our staff to give their time, to keep giving and not to count the cost, and not to wait for instruction was just wonderful. That's where I alluded to that article that was in *The Australian* that spoke of the work that was done by our senior students in helping set up the hospital. The wording in that article that disappointed me was that they did all of this work without any direction. That implies to me that the hospital staff ignored them and didn't support them in that process. What they did was trusted in their initiative and allowed them to work unsupervised, knowing that what they were doing was the right thing. I think it could have been worded much better. The layperson reading that article might have thought the hospital people were terrible. They weren't. They were outstanding. I couldn't believe that a fully functioning hospital could be set up in four hours.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** I'm not aware it's ever happened before. It's a miracle.

**KEVIN LEWIS:** In terms of setting up beds and rolling out gurneys and bringing trolleys and stands to hold up—

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** IVs.

**KEVIN LEWIS:** —IVs and all of that sort of stuff, manual operations, our kids did a wonderful job. But it wouldn't have been done without the direction of the hospital staff there. So I have to give them a huge amount of credit for being so patient and willing to work with young people who were just keen to help.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** Thank you for presenting today. Just building on what Catherine was asking, I'm just picturing the hundreds of patients and aged-care patients that you were mentioning in your statement. Surely there were quite a few critical incidents during that time or things going wrong within the school in terms of patients' health, in terms of aged-care patients. Was there anything that happened in terms of critical incidents during that time?

**KEVIN LEWIS:** The first evening there, Meg, who was overseeing the operation, had to call the police in because there were a couple of evacuees on site, God bless them, who were drinking—I think there may have been a hash pipe or something or one of those other drugs; I don't know; I can't remember—and, basically, get the police to help her go around to all of those evacuees and say, "This is a school site. You can't be doing those things here." By and large, they were compliant. They understood, and they were appreciative of the support that the school was giving to them. Maybe they did; maybe they didn't. Perhaps they were just more circumspect and secretive about what they were doing. If that's the case and there was no trouble that came from it, who can complain? They're displaced people. They haven't got a home to go to.

But, beyond that, in terms of aged care and high needs disability care—the disability patients had their own carers. They came along with people from a number of the facilities in town. Those carers were with them.

So, once they were settled and in, we had little to do with them, other than to provide them with meals when they needed it. It was more so those aged-care residents who were deemed to be self-care residents that then didn't attract somebody to come along with them because, in their own homes, they can care for themselves. But, when they're lying on a floor and can't get up, that was the challenge. Without question, my staff just took them to the bathrooms and washed them up and cleaned their beds and their linen and those sorts of things and supported them and cared for them. But, beyond that, in terms of critical incidents, the hospital, by and large, from what I saw—my interactions with Jenny when I was down there—was that it operated fairly smoothly.

**Ms SUE HIGGINSON:** It's a school. You say you cleaned linen and did all of that. Do you have facilities like washing machines? And it was raining.

**KEVIN LEWIS:** No. So we bagged all of those things up and put the call out via our Facebook page for families to come and collect that stuff and wash it for us, which they did happily. One of the great ironies of the whole situation was that we were called upon to put our buses into action to help the SES move round to various locations and to collect evacuees and displaced people whilst all of Blanch's buses were parked out the front of our school because they couldn't operate, because schools were pretty much closed down, which created traffic jams out the front of our school. The Blanch's buses weren't operating, but ours were put into service in order to help.

It may well have been a factor of the size of the buses, that ours was a little bit smaller. We've got a 25-seat Rosa and a 12-seat minibus, which might have been a little bit more agile around the place. The big school buses that carry 60 students may not have been able to get around the place. I imagine that's probably the reason why. But it was a great irony that they were parked there, causing traffic jams out the front of the school. There's no blame on Blanch's for any of that. They didn't know that we were going to be an evacuation centre, when they parked them. But it was a great irony that cars couldn't get past and ambulances couldn't get past because the buses were there.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** You made this work in very trying circumstances with little to no support. Going forward, do you see an opportunity to make not just your school but other schools work in these scenarios if arrangements are put in place beforehand, you can reclaim cost and that sort of stuff? Are our schools an option for these sort of events?

**KEVIN LEWIS:** I think they are. I think there's a whole lot of infrastructure work that needs to be done. We were moving people around the school. We have emergency night lighting. We don't have proper floodlighting for our travel ways and our passages in order to move people safely. We had to move some people out of Holy Family School onto our site, across a road, using mobile phone torches to light the way. That is probably one thing that our school needs to look at in terms of more lighting. But bringing those sorts of things, those practical things into play from the outset would be hugely important.

Yes, I think schools could play a role. They're big facilities. They're probably one of the most under-utilised public assets in any community. They're open from eight till four each day and closed on weekends and school holidays. So there are lots of opportunities to use them for these sorts of situations. But people would need to be on the ground. There was a lot of goodwill at my school. If that goodwill didn't exist, the place would not have functioned. There needs to be that sort of coordinated and targeted leadership on site to ensure that it operates effectively.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** Ideally, though, in relation to that, wouldn't it be preferable for evacuation centres to be established so that classes aren't disrupted in terms of students' education? Would you not agree?

**KEVIN LEWIS:** I would agree, yes.

**Ms CATE FAEHRMANN:** It's not like, "Well, let's use the Xavier Catholic School model and fit all these schools out." Ideally, you would agree, we do need education centres so that schools aren't needed.

**KEVIN LEWIS:** Yes. I used the word "fortuitous", but it's probably not the right word. But it was fortuitous that, for that period of time, we were going to be closed down anyway because our staff couldn't get to work and our kids couldn't get to school. So the impact on that in terms of learning—that was going to happen anyway.

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** Can I just comment too. Accommodating that number of people—the classrooms actually broke that up a bit, as opposed to some of the big auditoriums, and there was an opportunity. Anyway, they're very harrowing places, evacuation centres, is all I can say.

**KEVIN LEWIS:** We were ideal for the hospital downstairs because we had six separate classrooms with a centre space that was a common area that allowed them to set up wards with doors that closed and separated them from the group, and a triage and an emergency department and a specialised care—

**The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK:** A pharmacy.

**KEVIN LEWIS:** Yes, a pharmacy as well.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, sir.

**(The witness withdrew.)**

**The Committee adjourned at 19:23.**