REPORT ON PROCEEDINGS BEFORE

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

INQUIRY INTO THE RESPONSE TO MAJOR FLOODING ACROSS NEW SOUTH WALES IN 2022

CORRECTED

At Lismore Workers Sports Club, 202 Oliver Ave, Goonellabah NSW 2480 on Tuesday, 31 May 2022

The Committee met at 13:00.

PRESENT

The Hon. Walt Secord (Chair)

The Hon. Mark Banasiak (Deputy Chair)
The Hon. Scott Barrett
The Hon. Catherine Cusack
Ms Cate Faehrmann
Ms Sue Higginson
The Hon. Rod Roberts
The Hon. Penny Sharpe

* Please note:
[inaudible] is used when audio words cannot be deciphered.
[audio malfunction] is used when words are lost due to a technical malfunction.
[disorder] is used when members or witnesses speak over one another.

The CHAIR: Welcome to the second hearing of the Select Committee on the response to major flooding across New South Wales in 2022. The inquiry is examining 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. I acknowledge the Widjabul people of the Bundjalung Nation, the traditional custodians of the land on which we are meeting on today. I pay my respects to Elders past, present and emerging, and celebrate the diversity of Aboriginal people and their ongoing cultures and connections to the lands and waters of New South Wales. I also acknowledge and pay my respects to any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people joining us today.

Today we will be hearing from a number of stakeholders, including local members, local mayors, academics, representatives from the local health districts as well as local broadcasters. I thank everyone for making the time to give evidence today to this important inquiry. Before we commence, I will make some brief comments about today's procedures. Today's hearing is being broadcast live via the State Parliament's website. A transcript of today's hearing will be placed on the Committee's website when it becomes available. In accordance with broadcasting guidelines, media representatives are reminded that they must take responsibility for what they publish about today's Committee proceedings. While parliamentary privilege applies to witnesses giving evidence today, it does not apply to what witnesses say outside of their evidence at the hearing. 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 inquiry's terms of reference and avoid naming individuals unnecessarily. All witnesses have a right to procedural fairness according to the procedural fairness resolution adopted by the Parliament in 2018. If witnesses are unable to provide an answer to a question today and want more time to respond, they can take a question on notice. Written answers to questions on notice are to be provided within 21 days. If witnesses wish to hand up documents, they may do so through the Committee staff. To aid the audibility of this hearing, I remind both Committee members and witnesses to speak into the microphones. Finally, everyone should please turn their mobile phones to silent for the duration of the hearing.

Mr STEVE KRIEG, Mayor, Lismore City Council, sworn and examined

Ms JANELLE SAFFIN, Member for Lismore, before the Committee

Mr CHRISTOPHER GULAPTIS, Member for Clarence, before the Committee

Mr ROBERT MUSTOW, Mayor, Richmond Valley Council, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: I welcome our first witnesses. Under the provisions of this Committee, a short opening statement can be made by any or all witnesses if they wish. Mr Mustow, would you like to make a short opening statement?

ROBERT MUSTOW: I was elected Mayor of Richmond Valley Council in 2016. In 2017-18 a dry spell started. That went into one of the worst droughts in the east of Australia. In October 2019 our area was devastated by bushfires. We lost half of our council area, over 1,500 square kilometres, in those fires, and it burned out the village of Rappville, which you may have heard about. Then COVID hit. In the last three years we have had eight natural disaster declarations, including this flood. This flood has been unprecedented and our community is now really on its knees and we really need help. We are struggling not only financially but also emotionally. It is going to be a hard slog over the next few years to get back onto our feet.

Ms JANELLE SAFFIN: Firstly, I would like to say that a feature of our local community was the preparedness of everybody getting ready above the 2017 flood. Everybody did that in their businesses and in their homes. They lifted everything up. Also, our community saved lives. They were our lifesavers, they were our rescuers and we call them the "tinnie army". They went out in droves right across the region. Our local SES volunteers—too few, too under-resourced, too under-trained—were wonderful as well and did the same thing. The SES officer who caused the call-out on SES Facebook to our locals with boats, they said should be applauded. To the SES officer who caused that to be rescinded—well, I have said what I think should happen to them. That issue needs to be sought out and that is a fundamental feature of any response to a flood—how the local community is incorporated—because the SES cannot do it alone. It has to incorporate community. That is a key feature of disaster preparedness and the Sendai Framework, which Australia is party to.

There are a couple of other things that I would say. In terms of preparedness, there was a distinct lack of preparedness from government agencies that are asked to prepare and respond to disasters. I will talk about one particular agency—Resilience NSW. It has been found wanting at every level. It is institutionally incapable of doing the job that it is supposed to do by law. It was missing in every aspect. I will say a few brief things starting with the evacuation centres. They were missing. Yes, there were difficulties because some of the staff were flooded in, as were their families, so they could not get here. But there were no contingency plans. People talk about DCJ staff not being present; they were actually ordered out by Resilience NSW. I took action. I contacted the Premier and got them put back in. There was no security organised. I did things like that. There was a whole range of tasks that ordinarily would fall to the agency that myself and others undertook to make sure they happened.

It just showed an absolute lack of preparedness. The other point I will make is that everybody talks about this flood as being unprecedented. What I would say to that is, it isn't. If you read all the literature, if you read all the studies, it has been predicted that we could have big floods, even up to over 16 metres. But it is used almost as an excuse as to why certain actions are not taken. Unprecedented becomes almost, "Well, we couldn't have done this any better." Well, you can. On disaster preparedness, one of the fundamental principles is you prepare for what if, not what went before. That is part of the Sendai Framework, all of that, and these are the things that we have to be looking into. I do have a detailed submission—it is nearly completed—that will go to the other flood inquiry, the independent one. I know you have a cut-off date for your submissions, but I am happy to share it with you.

The CHAIR: We would like that. Can you give a commitment to provide that submission to us too?

Ms JANELLE SAFFIN: I can give a commitment because it is quite detailed.

Mr CHRISTOPHER GULAPTIS: I have prepared a written opening statement. The February 2022 flood was like nothing we have ever experienced before. Reportedly it was a one-in-2,000-year event. In terms of flood preparation, communities, councils and government agencies generally prepare for a one-in-100-year event. This was off the Richter scale. No-one was prepared for the size of the flood or how widespread the devastation was. The BOM, with all its technology and science, should have determined that this was going to be a major flood and put out early warnings. It was a very wet summer and the volume of rain we experienced prior to the flood certainly pointed to this. So there was no early warning and communities were ill-prepared. The response

from government agencies was inadequate because they were caught off guard. Yes, they did their very best, but they had never experienced flooding of this size and scale.

With people stranded on rooftops, trees, high ground and anything else they could cling to, they had to rely on volunteers in their tinnies, on jet skis or anything else that floated to rescue them. These volunteers were not restricted by the workplace health and safety policies of the trained SES volunteers, so they set off at all hours of the day and night, irrespective of the conditions, to help rescue people who otherwise would have perished.

That's certainly something we must review—how we can better coordinate and train our citizens when we have emergencies, not just for their own safety, but to be more effective and efficient. The lack of communication was a major issue with the communications at Woodburn being down, leaving the Northern Rivers without mobile reception for over a week. That left families stranded on rooftops with a mobile phone but without any reception. Because of the size and scale of the flooding, the response from government agencies was also slow. Evacuation centres relied on our community volunteers, in particular in the smaller communities like Coraki, Woodburn and Broadwater. People were sleeping on the floors of schools, churches and halls. Families were in together with people who had complex conditions, all sleeping next to each other, or in their cars with their pets for well over a week. Just by comparison, the tent village for 500 RFS volunteers was set up at Wollongbar in just two days, just one week after the flood. I believe this type of temporary accommodation is suitable and warranted for evacuees of any natural disaster, rather than have them all crammed together.

I have received criticism of government agencies tasked with assisting flood victims recover that their response is too slow and bureaucratic. I believe this is largely due to the coordinated response—or lack of coordinated response—from State and Federal agencies. Assessing applications is too long and the criteria is too restrictive. There is a concern that there is a greater emphasis and cost placed on ensuring that grants are not rorted, rather than the value of the actual rorting itself. This is slowing down the opportunities for families, businesses and communities to rebuild. If it takes too long to rebuild communities then they will just disappear.

In terms of response, I think we need a better warning system and better preparedness. The warning system from the BoM must be reviewed. Flood mitigation measures must be reviewed. That's not just levees and flood detention basins, but also reviewing flood-prone lands and building standards, dredging rivers and ensuring flood drains are regularly maintained—something that has lapsed in the last 20 years. Better coordination of response agencies, community volunteers and recovery agencies needs to occur, and simplifying grant applications with a focus on the flood victims and expediting their recovery. In particular—right at this particular moment—there needs to be urgency in ensuring people have housing and they can have a job, because, without that, we're going to see families leave the area and communities completely disappear. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Gulaptis. Ms Saffin, in your opening statement you were quite critical of Resilience NSW. I know you have extensive experience in nation-building—the nations of East Timor, Burma. You are an expert in this area. What happened with Resilience NSW?

Ms JANELLE SAFFIN: Well, they were missing in action and they never made their presence known. By the time a coordinator was appointed—and it was someone that I spoke to. Gary McKinnon was the person appointed. But by the time—they just were missing in action in every way. Their job is to prepare for disasters, and that means having response plans, recovery plans, coordinating with all the other agencies, and they just were simply not there. I'll give a few examples. I would get calls—I was at the recovery centre at Southern Cross University from the first week, and I would get asked all the time, "There's no staff here." There were DCJ staff there, then I got told they were ordered out by Resilience.

That was just so unbelievable, because DCJ staff actually do know how to respond at a human level in disasters. They have been doing it for a long time. So I put in a call at the highest level; they were put back in. Then they got pushed out again; I did that again. I heard it happened in other centres. Then at State level, through the SOC, Salvation Army are given the task of food across the State. No-one would talk to them. So, again, I had to make phone calls to make sure that the Salvation Army were hooked in to the State processes. Then there was, with food distribution—the list goes on. Just in every area where they were supposed to be present, there was an absolute gap and then not even an explanation for it.

The CHAIR: Ms Saffin, would you agree with the statement that the agency responsible for responding to a natural disaster itself was completely unprepared?

Ms JANELLE SAFFIN: It was completely unprepared. And I have been rather unkind; I did say on the Ray Hadley show that they should be dismembered, meaning they are not fit for purpose. We need to do a whole rethink about what sort of response recovery agency we need at State level, and we need to look no further north than the Queensland Reconstruction Authority.

The CHAIR: Would you go as far as to say that Resilience NSW in fact got in the way and actually hindered your efforts, and the community's efforts?

Ms JANELLE SAFFIN: I have said publicly that they were clearly not helpful—were in the road. And I, quite frankly, don't really deal with them. I've had to work around them, and work with a whole range of other agencies to make sure things happened. I'll stay very critical because—I don't like to be unkind; there's some fantastic people in there—

The CHAIR: I know that. I know that you're not that.

Ms JANELLE SAFFIN: —great people. It's not about them. They are institutionally incapable of doing their job.

The CHAIR: Mr Krieg, we are now almost three months after the devastating floods. Are people still using camp ovens? Is electricity on in the CBD? Can you give us a bit of an update, and also please tell us about the mental health state of the community too?

STEVE KRIEG: Yes. The community is really struggling at the moment; there's no question about that. Even though power has technically been restored, that is, for most residents, a double power point coming out of their meter box.

The CHAIR: What's a double power point?

STEVE KRIEG: It's just a double outlet.

The CHAIR: What you have in your bathroom?

STEVE KRIEG: What you have in your bathroom. Until we can get the certified electricians in to rebuild the meter boxes, that's what people are living with. There are literally thousands of people who are living in homes with no internal walls, quite often no front and back doors. They have no refrigeration in their homes at the moment because of the limited power supply. I remember the very first week, Lismore was delivered—to its evacuation centre—a pallet of gas-fired camping stoves, which were gone within hours.

The CHAIR: The little tiny ones that you take camping?

STEVE KRIEG: The little tiny that you take camping, that are powered by the tiny little portable gas—

The CHAIR: People are feeding their families with that?

STEVE KRIEG: And they have to get to these evacuation centres—or these centres run by Lifeline and other such organisations—to get food, because they can't store food in their homes. They don't have the refrigeration capabilities, so they're visiting these refuges three times a day to get their supplies to keep their family going.

The CHAIR: What about young people and the mental health of young people? What's the state of play in that area?

STEVE KRIEG: Obviously very fragile. I talk to so many people throughout the course of the day who—you know, we've grown up going to sleep with rain on our roofs, and people cannot go to sleep with the sound of rain at the moment. The long-term devastation caused to people by this disaster is—we're not going to know the effects for another 12 to 18 months.

People are really struggling to get back to a normal routine at the moment. You can't live a normal daily life of getting up and going to work and taking the kids to school. The kids have lost their schools. There are many schools that have been displaced and had to relocate. People who are employed in certain businesses—who knows when those businesses are going to come back? They're literally living on whatever Centrelink that they're entitled to, which is not a lot.

The CHAIR: Sir, my colleagues want to ask questions. I'll ask you one last one and then I'll throw to my colleagues. What about young people? Are they leaving the area? What's going on with them? I've heard that anecdotally, that people are just simply packing up and leaving.

STEVE KRIEG: I can only speak for myself and what I've heard as well. I know in my business that pre-flood we employed 22 staff. We put a call out just this weekend for—we're five weeks maybe, at best, from coming back into our own business and there's seven that are available to come back to work, which makes me question where the other 15 have gone. Hopefully they've found other employment in the area, but I've also heard of others moving away. They're renting an uninhabitable house, so they've gone somewhere where they can find suitable housing and suitable employment.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: I have a follow-up question for Ms Saffin. When Resilience was just suggesting DCJ should leave, was there any particular reason, or could you guess, as to why they were suggesting they should leave at that early point?

Ms JANELLE SAFFIN: It appeared to be just a demarcation issue, like, "This is our job, we're in charge and we'll do it." That's the conversation I heard, which made no sense because in a disaster response you use the best people for the job at hand.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: In a couple of weeks the Committee will be in Sydney and we will have a lot of the government agencies before us. We'll be asking them various questions and talking to them about the evidence from today. They will tell us that they are doing everything humanly possible to get people back into their homes, to rebuild homes and to get kids back into their own school. What's your experience on the ground in terms of how the Government is responding? Is it doing everything that is humanly possible? I will start with Ms Saffin.

Ms JANELLE SAFFIN: Yes and no to that question. I will give one example. Tweed Shire Council—there was a proposal there where there was a whole block of units for sale beside the police station in Tweed Heads. Tweed Shire is in my electorate of Lismore as well, Murwillumbah-Tweed Valley. It was put to the Government: "Here's a ready-made solution." It was not a huge cost. You could buy these and house a lot of people almost immediately. It wasn't even looked at. Instead, they'll all go in pods somewhere. It is an issue we raised earlier: You need to look at what the community needs, not what your programs are and we have to match the programs. What I've said is that the disaster response that exists and the grants are not commensurate with the magnitude of this event. We have internally displaced persons and communities. That requires a whole different way of thinking. That thinking has not been brought to bear.

The answer is no, even where there is goodwill and wanting to do the right thing. We already had a housing crisis and we now have a bigger one. We need much more creativity to the way we did it. When my colleague the member for Clarence talked about what was stood up at Wollongbar, that could have been stood up for people quite quickly and it had all the ablutions there. Things like that could be done. Then, when the pods are set up, they've got difficult access, no annexes and no things. Yes, it's wonderful because you've got somewhere, but it should be more than adequate.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: If you don't mind, I'd like to just stay with the evacuation centres issue again. You were going to say something in relation to the food. I know I was bewildered by some of the experiences but I am in a different LGA. What was the situation with the food? Secondly, what should we do differently in evacuation centres in future? Mr Gulaptis, I'd like to ask you the same question.

Ms JANELLE SAFFIN: Firstly, we should be prepared. We know what to expect in an evacuation centre—that's not an unknown. We know we're going to get people who are traumatised, displaced with their pets, with their medical needs and with all of the things that go with it. It's actually a known quantity. It's not that difficult to say what needs to happen—and it just didn't happen at all. Security, for instance—you do need security. Everything I encountered at SCU I knew was being encountered in other evacuation centres. It related right across the board.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: I just found confusion as to who was running the centre.

Ms JANELLE SAFFIN: Well no-one was, at the start.

STEVE KRIEG: Can I add a little? To have a public service come in and run an evacuation centre is a challenge because it's almost treated like a nine-to-five job. I think what you have to understand is an evacuation centre at the height of a natural disaster is a 24-hour, seven-days-a-week job. I think that is where Resilience really struggled with the concept of a "Well, it's five o'clock and I'm going to go home" sort of scenario. I know that Lismore City Council staff ran an evacuation centre in one of their council facilities for up to 800 people for more than two weeks before a State government agency came in to offer some support.

The CHAIR: Two weeks?

STEVE KRIEG: Two weeks. There are people in the room who manned that evacuation centre, local elected councillors who were doing the night shift from 7.00 p.m. to 7.00 a.m., acting as counsellor, security guard and, sadly to say, methadone distributor—all of these things that need to be taken into account at an evacuation centre—because government agencies simply were not there.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Just to reinforce what Ms Saffin said, this is really a reflection on the system rather than the individuals because I think we all know that there were some amazing individuals—

STEVE KRIEG: That is 100 per cent right.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: —in the system. I just wanted the record to reflect—

STEVE KRIEG: That is 100 per cent correct.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Mr Gulaptis?

Mr CHRISTOPHER GULAPTIS: I've got to go back to what I said in my opening statement. I don't want to use that term "unprecedented" but nobody had ever planned for a flood of this magnitude. Areas got flooded that were never previously flooded and people were inundated for a lot longer than they had ever thought they would be. Janelle is right: People in Lismore would have been prepared, but they would have been prepared for a one in 100-year flood. They would have thought, "Yes, we're going to get water downstairs. It might come up a bit high. We'll put a few things up on tables and benches and we should be right." But when it got to the ceiling in Lismore and when it covered rooftops in Woodburn, Coraki and Broadwater, it caught everybody off guard in those communities.

In addition, it caught off the government agencies, so there was heavy reliance on community volunteers and we saw them at their best under really extremely difficult circumstances. We saw donations of food. There were all sorts of food that was being delivered. It wasn't coordinated because donors were coming from everywhere with whatever they thought people needed. Whilst it was gratefully accepted, some of it was just not necessary. In fact, it was overstocked and people were getting more than they could actually cope with, though nobody wanted to say, "Don't send any more" because they didn't know how long they'd be living in that evacuation centre.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Just to follow on from that, what was the increase in impact from the 11.2 metres, 11.4 metres that everyone seemed to have been expecting and people were saying, "Oh yeah, we were ready, we were prepared" while others were saying, "It wasn't going to affect us"—and it did?

What is the level of impact increase from there to what it actually was—that additional two metres?

Mr CHRISTOPHER GULAPTIS: Two and a half.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Yes. Does it double the amount of work and drain on those resources?

STEVE KRIEG: It would more than double that. You are finding properties and businesses that were previously sold in flood-free land that were inundated with water. The simple surface area of the land that was covered with that extra 2½ metres is incomprehensible. Instead of dealing with maybe 500 evacuees in Lismore, we were dealing with 4,000. They are the people that were rescued from their roofs, let alone the people that had got out the day before. The extra stress and the extra strain of that 2½ metres of water is incalculable, I would say, at this stage.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Thank you very much everyone for coming. I know that all of you have worked extremely hard for a very long time. You must be very tired. I just want to acknowledge your individual contributions first up. Councillor Mustow, I might start with you. Yesterday we had a look at Coraki and talked to people from Broadwater.

ROBERT MUSTOW: Woodburn.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Yes, Woodburn—those very small communities that were really cut off. I was just wondering if you wanted to talk about—Lismore was able to get a lot of boats very quickly—the impacts on those smaller communities and what you see as being the real gaps there.

ROBERT MUSTOW: Thanks for your question. I was feeling a bit left out there for a while. I didn't have much chance.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: You're in.

The CHAIR: We were going to get to you.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: There is still more time.

ROBERT MUSTOW: I would just like to say in support of Janelle's statement earlier—I will leave two documents. One is our submission to the other inquiry. The other ones—we have already done three documents in the early days of the response and also the economic impact. And this one now is our Rebuilding the Richmond Valley over the next three years. So I'll leave those with you. A lot of work has gone into those. If you want to understand what the Richmond Valley impact has been, I would ask you to really have a look at those. We can get those by email to you. Janelle has just touched on the recovery. I would like to read a couple of sentences out of that document please. It says:

> If communities are to survive and successfully recover from natural disasters on the scale of the 2022 Northern Rivers floods in the future, the lead response from state government needs to improve. Despite the considerable investment in Resilience NSW, the NSW Government still lacks a clear, decisive and cohesive capacity for emergency response and recovery. Responsibilities between agencies are poorly defined and the process of decision-making and information sharing is cumbersome. This means that the front-line agencies such as councils, are often left in the dark, with no answers or resources to help their communities while State agencies attempt to unravel their own bureaucracy.

I will give you an example of that:

> As an example of post-flood delays in critical decisions, Richmond Valley Council identified the need to provide urgent temporary housing at Coraki community and where it can be placed within five days of the 28 February flood.

I have seen the letter. It was sent on 5 March. The document continues:

> Despite numerous meetings and various multiple-agency committees, and Council providing detailed information on suitable sites, there is still no public commitment to private temporary homes 11 weeks after the floods. Coraki families continue to live in damp, over-crowded conditions in cars, sheds and tents while multiple State agencies work through Government processes before making key decisions. The Government needs to become more agile in its decision making, as this shouldn't happen.

Now back to Woodburn, Broadwater and Coraki. Those towns were very heavily impacted. What is unrealised is that Casino, the biggest town in our council area, was impacted but not with much devastation. But we had between 250 and 300—we are not quite sure—of inundated properties. Some Catholic Church units there are scattered around a low-lying area. There are over 50 units there. Some of those are single, aged people; some of them are couples. You could say there are 70 to 75 people just in there. So Casino did not have the devastation.

The further you went down the river, Coraki was inundated. You got to Woodburn—more double storeys. Then you got to Broadwater and there was a lot of devastation—houses washed off and cars upside down on the sand and silt. Those towns are struggling. At one stage you could not buy fuel in Coraki, Woodburn or Broadwater. Two service stations have reopened. Those people had come to Casino, Evans Head or Lismore or go to Ballina to get fuel. People are trying to get back into their homes. There have been pods put there for the amenities. But take the hotel, for one instance, with businesses. They really worked hard to reopen because in Woodburn the hotel is like in any small town—it is the centre or part of the community. People go there to meet and socialise and have functions. It is the same as the hotel at Broadwater. Believe it or not, the new owner had only been there for a very short time—weeks—and the bowling club there is still closed. They are having drinks on the greens because they cannot get into their clubhouse. But at the hotel in Woodburn, now what he is finding is he has done all the work but there is no-one there in the town to come to support his hotel. So he is struggling.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Thank you. I just have two follow-ups from that, if I can. Thank you for providing the Committee the list of what needs to happen. Have you got dollars attached to what that is likely to look like if it was to be fully funded?

ROBERT MUSTOW: For Richmond Valley we are estimating definitely more than $150 million but we have a problem. We always hear of the Richmond and the Wilson catchment areas. There is another player in that game that is called the Bungawalbin. The Bungawalbin gets water from the Great Dividing Range on the coastal side, way up in Picapine Forest behind Rappville. Rappville had inundations too. It is a large area, but it is very flat so the water just doesn't get away quickly. A lot of our assessments have to be done in that area. The general manager and I got through there about two weeks ago, but we have had a bit of rain since, so there are people still isolated in those areas that are struggling. They are getting out now, but the trouble is we can do the roads but we are not allowed to go in to do their private driveways. So they are having trouble getting from their houses out onto the roads.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Ballina talked to us about this yesterday.

ROBERT MUSTOW: I believe that the Government is looking to try to help those people, which it needs to if we can. But we are still assessing those properties and the roads. I also wear another hat while I sit here and that is the chair of Rouse Water. You will have a deputation here later I believe. There is a levee bank down there that has been washed away. We can't fix those things because it's just too wet in that country.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Councillor Krieg, similarly—we heard from Ballina yesterday. Again, we know that these are kind of ballpark but they are talking about $150 million, as with Richmond River. Where is Lismore at in terms of your list?

STEVE KRIEG: Conservative estimates are around $250 million for our road network alone. We've got 1,200 kilometres worth of road network in our local government area. And we have had, like every other place from Tweed down to the Clarence, road slips and whole roads washed away. So the road network alone is $250 million. For other infrastructure, you're probably looking at another $200 million to $250 million on top of that as well.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: We've heard from the Government that I think there is $312 million for the Betterment Fund, which is on top of that. That is clearly not going to be enough. But what I wanted to particularly ask you with both of you here is, we were told yesterday that a lot of these grants are competitive grants processes. Is that the model that you would like to do? Is there any ability for you to all get into a room together and actually prioritise together the kind of funding? Is that something that you would like or would you be happy with a competitive grants mechanism in terms of accessing the funds? How do you think it's going to work?

STEVE KRIEG: I don't know how it's going to work, to be honest with you. It has been said this is an unprecedented natural disaster. We've had commitment from the Government that we're going to build back better, but you can't do that without the cashflow. I don't want to sit in a room with the Mayor of Richmond Valley and fight over $10 million. I don't think that's fair on either of us. I think it should be a needs basis. We're a very proud people on the Northern Rivers and we're not used to begging, but we need help to rebuild our community. We don't want to just rebuild back to where we were. We want to rebuild back better. We live in the best place in Australia, and we deserve that.

ROBERT MUSTOW: Can I just make a follow-up comment on that? Look, floods don't have boundaries in our local government areas. What happens here is if Lismore gets some funding for a road, that road could come into Richmond Valley or go to Ballina, and it's the same with us. We use it for our transport, our freighting, or people travelling to work. So I've got no problem seeing Lismore or Ballina get funding. Actually, earlier today Minister Kevin Anderson announced some money for sewerage works. I think it was—

STEVE KRIEG: A hundred and fifty-five.

ROBERT MUSTOW: Million.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Forty-five.

ROBERT MUSTOW: A hundred and forty-five. Realistically, Lismore needs all of that funding. It might sound strange for a mayor from another council to say that. The reason is that the sewage coming out of that plant is not treated to a standard it should be. That is going into Wilsons River. Wilsons River goes down and joins Richmond and Coraki, which is my town. That goes down through Woodburn, Broadwater and into Ballina. So that needs to be cleaned up, and I'm happy for that money to be spent in Lismore to clear up the whole river system. I mentioned the roads, but each council then does have its own priorities and own roads. This catastrophe cannot be fixed in 12 months. This is going to be a three- to five-year, and there has to be ongoing funding because some of these roads are saturated that much and the landslips—it's going to take that long to fix it. The funding, it needs to be more.

We all need to work together as Federal, State and local governments and work for the betterment of our community. I know there are a lot of negatives coming out of here today, but there are some really good positives. After the fires in 2019—this time three months after—we were still arguing with the Government about who was going to clean it up. That rubbish has been removed, which is an outstanding success. We mustn't forget that. The Government gave each council $1 million. That cash flow allowed us to get into some really high-priority work early. So we're thankful there. We need to work together. Bickering and fighting and things like that between councils, who gets this and that—that's not going to cut it. We need to work together. It's one region, and we need to act as a region.

The Hon. MARK BANASIAK: Let's look to the rebuild. Obviously the community seeing a timely rebuild and a rebuild for something better, that's going to do wonders for their mental health to see that progressing well. From both council, where is your vision for that? I understand you tabled a document. I'm wondering if you could flesh that out a bit for both. Where is the council's vision for that rebuild? Additionally, outside of that ongoing funding, are there any policy leaders? Are there any regulation or legislation leaders that perhaps could be called by the State Government to make that rebuild easier, quicker or better? I might start with you, Councillor.

STEVE KRIEG: That's the million-dollar question. We have the reconstruction corporation that is due to come into effect from 1 July, who in theory has those levers to pull. The great unknown for local governments is whether they are going to help in that rebuild with pulling those levers and achieving those goals. I think what Mayor Mustow said about the longevity of the rebuild is really important to take note. Three to five years is a conservative time frame on the rebuild, but that's the sort of time frame that we need to look at. There is no point rebuilding something to be the same as it was before. We have to do things better than they were. We have to do things smarter than they were. We have to build back more resilient than they were, and that takes into account how we live with our river system. We have to have that whole catchment strategy, not only study but the recommendations out of those taken on board and put into place, otherwise we are going to be sitting here again after the next disaster, talking about the same things. Our communities can't afford to do that again.

ROBERT MUSTOW: As I said with our document earlier, we know where we are going. We have a pathway that will need a lot of cooperation and funding from governments, Federal and State. There are things that are happening in our community now, regulations and red tapes like the house-raising program. People want to get back into their house—they don't want to fix them up—and then be able to jack them up. We need to do some FUD studies very quickly. The people need to be told, "Yes, you'll be able to raise your house," or, "No, you can't." The red tape that has got involved—and I did mention that to the then Prime Minister. I was pretty frank, actually, because we had been around a few disasters and we understand that the red tape, in the end, gets involved. I did say to him, excuse the French, "We need to cut the bullshit and the red tape and get on with it."

Unfortunately, the red tape is back in. I have been constantly bombarded by people who are frustrated, disappointed and angry with the application processes to get back to homes and business grants. Even before I came here today I got a call. Apparently, if you have a problem, they are going to do one-on-one with Resilience NSW or Service NSW in early June. This person rang up because he has been having problems, and he had to go through the whole rigmarole again of filling out an application when they already had it. People are just frustrated, and there's a real lot of anger, I can tell you.

The Hon. MARK BANASIAK: To follow up quickly, in hindsight, should that one-on-one support have been on the ground much earlier, going around to these people and saying, "Let me help you through this process. Let me help you through this application process and let's get it done together"?

ROBERT MUSTOW: I won't go into my personal details, but it's very frustrating. You ring numbers, you get passed here and passed there. Yes, there could have been what I would call a case manager to take on any of these. It's very frustrating. I feel for the people out there. They're kind of in no-man's-land. They don't know what their future is. We need to give them some vision of where they're going in their life, and just at present some of them aren't getting that.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mr Krieg, can I ask you a quick question about the inflexibility or the rigidity of the Government? It has been brought to my attention that the department of local government is insisting that Lismore City Council actually issue rates notices to people in the community right now. Don't you think that is absolutely unfair and inflexible? How could people pay their rates notices right now?

STEVE KRIEG: It's 100 per cent unfair. From day one, when I was asked how could the State Government help, I said first thing in week one we need rate relief. We are looking at, 12 weeks on, one of the inflexibilities in dealing with this sort of thing in that it's actually a legal requirement for local governments to charge rates notices, regardless of whether a house is uninhabitable or not.

The CHAIR: People are homeless and the State Government is insisting they pay their rates?

STEVE KRIEG: That is correct. As I said, I don't think bureaucratically it is understood the scale of the trauma that is involved. I keep trying to make this a humanitarian crisis, which it is. The humans of our region are suffering terribly. They are unemployed. They are homeless. They have lost their biggest asset. The biggest asset that you ever buy in your life is your home, and in our region they have been submerged in 14.4 metres of water. Yet, as a council, we are forced by law to charge rates notices and water bills. You have to understand that these people have used an unbelievable amount of water to try to clean the absolute disgusting mess that is flood mud off their premises and off everything that they own, and they are getting billed for it. There is no recourse at the moment from a local government perspective to be able to say, "Don't worry about it. We've got it."

The CHAIR: How does that make you feel as mayor? How does that make you feel as a representative of the community?

STEVE KRIEG: Embarrassed, angry, sad and humiliated. As a very newly elected local government representative, I would have thought that, as a council, we can help our citizens in some way. To find out that it is a legal requirement and the State Government requires us to charge rates on these homes and these businesses was a shock to me. It is something that I have been advocating for, for 12 weeks, and hopefully it will have an outcome. This is the sort of nonsense, red-tape rubbish that we are dealing with at a local government level, imposed on us from the State Government.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Can I just clarify something? Are you saying that someone from the State Government has contacted you, insisting that you put out rates notices or are you saying that there is legislation that says you have to?

ROBERT MUSTOW: It is legislated.

STEVE KRIEG: It is legislated.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: I feel they are two different things.

ROBERT MUSTOW: Can I make a follow-up comment on that? As Steve said, he got thrown into the job in December and was welcomed. It is legislation that councils must charge rates. Now, I will give you an example. Richmond Valley collects about $15 million a year in general rates. We wrote a letter to the Government—I think it was in April; we got a reply back in May—asking for rate relief. We were on the front foot there; it was the same with the housing. We got a reply back that they would look at it.

The CHAIR: That they would look at it?

ROBERT MUSTOW: Yes, but since then—and we got an inquiry from the Government to ask how much we anticipated flood rates would have cost. It is $6 million. Now if council said, "We're not going to charge that $6 million," that takes our rates down to nine. To get out of that, we would have to cut staff and cut services. We need staff to rebuild, so technically we cannot afford not to charge rates. In the fires, the Government came to the party and paid the rates for those people who were fire affected. The same thing needs to happen with the floods.

The CHAIR: But, Mr Mayor, don't you think that the State Government should show some humanity?

ROBERT MUSTOW: Yes.

The CHAIR: People have lost their homes. They have nowhere to live, and the State Government is insisting they pay their rates. I think the State Government should show some humanity.

ROBERT MUSTOW: It is in legislation, and I wouldn't say it was only this Government. I would say that has been in legislation for most probably 50 to 60 years.

The CHAIR: But it is unfair.

ROBERT MUSTOW: To break legislation—you would know it better than me—I think that would have to go back to Parliament to change the legislation.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: I wanted to come back to the issue of the warning systems and ask both mayors about the rain gauges in the catchments, whether that was an issue and what should be done to improve on the warning system.

STEVE KRIEG: I know that the gauges in the Lismore LGA—we actually applied for a government grant for $110,000 to upgrade our gauges and our warning systems. It was to also include CCTV upriver so that we could actually visually see the water rises. Three days before the first flood that came back as not a priority and that grant was knocked back. The twenty-eighth of February caused substantial damage to the current system, so when the second flood hit at the end of March the readings were by no means accurate—I believe anywhere between 600 mils and a metre out. The initial flood of 28 February, on the Sunday the bureau did put out a flood warning for a major flood of anywhere between 10.5 and 11.5 metres, which would see our levee overtopped. The Lismore LGA community prepared as best they could, in my opinion, for that major flood event. It was predicted that the levee, if it was going to be overtopped, would be at midday on Monday. Rescues were getting carried out at 3.00 a.m.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Coming back to the rain gauges, perhaps I might ask you, Councillor Mustow, because I know that you had some affected by bushfires. Is that correct?

ROBERT MUSTOW: I am not sure of that. I have not heard of that. I get a lot of calls from people wanting more gauges on the Richmond River upstream and downstream of Casino. I believe there is no gauge between Woodburn and Burns Point Ferry, which is at Ballina. Broadwater and Cabbage Tree have not got a gauge near them. That is what I am told.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Whose financial responsibility is maintaining the gauges and planning them?

ROBERT MUSTOW: I really do not know.

Ms JANELLE SAFFIN: Can I respond to that, Catherine? In my submission I have detail about the gauges and even name all the ones that were non-operational and talk about the confusion of the responsibility about who is responsible. One person ended up being alone responsible for some, and then went off sick. Some of them were not working, but it is in my submission.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: It does seem to me that if the BOM and the SES—centralised in Wollongong or Sydney or wherever they are—are going to be in charge of making these calls, they need the best possible data.

Ms JANELLE SAFFIN: We do not have it.

STEVE KRIEG: I think, for the sake of that cost saving, centralising these organisations is putting communities like the Northern Rivers at risk, because we are losing a lot of the local knowledge that many farmers and many locals that have lived here—their families have been here generationally. There are second-, third-, fourth-generation people living on properties. They know the weather patterns. They know the river heights visually. They are getting hung up on when they are trying to warn agencies of river heights. You put a call in to the SES for sandbag pick-up stations and you get directed through to Wollongong, who are not aware of flood events that are happening in Lismore. The centralisation of these agencies, I think, is a real problem area. We need to decentralise and have local knowledge in the local areas to be able to have that adequate warning system.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: I want to turn to the issue of black mould. We talked about it this morning on our little tour around the area. Janelle, you talked about the lack of support or advice from NSW Health in relation to black mould. What has NSW Health done in terms of informing the local community about the risks of black mould? What support has been provided by the Government to help fully eradicate black mould from the region?

Ms JANELLE SAFFIN: There has been nothing formally done, that I know of, by NSW Health. I have not seen anything. If others have, they might come forward on that, but I have not seen it. Also, a local person came from Natroshield. He is a chap who offers that service, a commercial service. He does it in Queensland and other places, and I know governments use him. He came here and did that voluntarily, and he did it so well, and everybody took advantage of it. I did ask, along with others, if that could be funded because it was an important service. People were taking the liquid away and using it in their homes. In fact, some builders or tradies required that that be done before you go in. Because it was deemed by the Government as an unsolicited commercial proposal, they said no.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: So what have they done instead? If they are saying that this is an unsolicited commercial proposal, what is the Government's solution to the black mould problem?

Ms JANELLE SAFFIN: Nothing that I know of or that I have been advised of. I do not know if—

Mr CHRISTOPHER GULAPTIS: No, I am not aware of anything.

Ms JANELLE SAFFIN: No. All of us, I think I am speaking—there has been nothing. And it is a massive problem. It is a huge health problem. I was saying this morning that my car—I had not driven it for a week. I got in this morning. It is full of mould. There is mould absolutely everywhere, and we are not dealing with it. I just want to say one other thing. We need a package designed for the Northern Rivers. The grants are just not adequate for our rebuild, and also we just need a package designed and there has been very little that came. I know there is always this $3 billion figure bandied about, that there is money from State and Federal. There was actually very little that actually came from the Federal Government.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Just on that, this points to a greater need in the long term for sustainable funding to local government, doesn't it? If local government is at the coalface, if you like, of natural disasters, which will only increase in scale and frequency, doesn't there need to be a seismic shift in the way in which local government is funded across the board?

Ms JANELLE SAFFIN: I would agree with that because they are often the first port of call and they are quite active in the community, all our local governments. They are also part of that initial response command centres with their LEMOs and everything, and I do not think they get enough funding or training in those particular areas at all. But, yes, they need to be part and parcel of the preparedness.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Councillor Mustow, do you have an opinion on that?

ROBERT MUSTOW: I do. Funding for local government over the years has been very restricted but what goes with it is a lot of cost shifting. The legislation was made; "Councils can look after it." That really puts a drain on our finances. I think there needs to be a really big look at our emergency services and how they are organised and Resilience NSW. In the early days, I know that there were a lot of questions from government departments; "Where is Resilience NSW?" They were not around.

I said this to the Prime Minister that day too. I said, "At the end of this natural disaster, it will be like the other ones I have witnessed. All the agencies will leave and you know who is holding the baby. It is local government." We need ongoing finance to be able to deliver those services because we are at the coalface. We have all the people's frustrations. I am sure Steve gets a lot of phone calls from his community; I know I do. We are left there at the end of the day and we are taking a lot of inquiries from people and a lot of them are just angry that the Government is just slowly withdrawing. One thing I did not mention earlier about a positive was the way the army came in and did a great job for the whole Northern Rivers. That was great too.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: As a follow-up, Steve and the mayors, on the role that your councils played in terms of a comms centre in the response, whether it was your websites or Facebook pages and those sorts of things, what do you think the need is for that going forward in between responses and in future responses? Is that your preferred? Do you want that stream or do you think it is valuable and you need it? Is it a place where your local community went to? Steve?

STEVE KRIEG: Yes. Communications will come out as one of the biggest downfalls of what we lived through. There is no question about that, but for me personally I was doing daily updates based on what was coming out of the emergency operations centre to keep the community informed. I know that that proved to be very popular. One of the benefits, if you would like to call it that, is that the emergency operations centre was based at Lismore City Council's chambers so I was in there a fair bit and I was getting the up-to-date information and sharing that on my mayoral Facebook page to try and keep the community informed.

One of the saddest things for regional Australia is the loss of our daily papers, which used to keep our community informed. That is just the way of the future I guess, but people need to be told what is going on and where to go to and what services are available. I think it is sad, to be honest with you, that we are relying on social media now to get that information out when only a few short years ago we did have the daily papers and different things like that to be able to get the word out. For me, communication was a struggle; there is no question about that. It continues to be a struggle to be honest with you. As I said, to rely on social media to get the word out I think is something that needs to be looked at as well. I do not think it is the answer.

ROBERT MUSTOW: Similar here. Communications for the people in the lower river—and I know in the event on the night I had my own challenges and we just could not get reception. On how you get it out to people, I believe there needs to be only one message coming out and that is from the services. People were putting stuff on there that was not factual. I shared a lot of stuff, but Richmond Valley Council's comms were putting stuff out as it came to them, and then I just shared it and things like that. It is a problem, the communications, and then the other thing is if they use their phones, they have no way to charge them. They run out of power and it is a bit of a slog. I know you want to wind up and I need to say something for the lower river people down at Coraki, Woodburn and Broadwater. There needs to be a look and an inquiry into the Pacific Motorway. I do not know if that has been raised with you anywhere.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Yes, it has.

The CHAIR: It has been raised with us, yes, but state your position.

ROBERT MUSTOW: There is a lot of frustration and comments down there and people's different views. There needs to be a good look at that and whatever comes out needs to be made public because if it is not now, the next time there is a flood it will only come back. It needs to be looked at, whether that motorway stopped any water and held it back.

The CHAIR: Thank you, sir. Thank you, everyone, and thank you for everything that you do.

STEVE KRIEG: Thanks for your time.

ROBERT MUSTOW: Thank you very much for the opportunity and please take time to look at that if you could.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

(Short adjournment)

Professor TYRON CARLIN, Vice Chancellor, Southern Cross University, sworn and examined

The CHAIR: Under the provisions of this Committee, you have the option of making a short opening statement if you wish. Would you like to do so?

TYRONE CARLIN: I will, and it will be short. Thank you, Chair. I want to start that brief statement by just thanking the members of the Committee for being here today and for taking this evidence in the region. That means a lot to me and I am sure to many members of the community. I know it is not easy sometimes to get out and about, but I think it is really important that you're here. Thank you for doing that. I say this wholly as a personal observation but also on behalf of the university. I want to acknowledge the amazing work that our local member of Parliament, Janelle Saffin, has done throughout this very, very difficult time and it really has been quite inspirational to see a little of what she has done and the passion she has brought to that work. I thank her very, very sincerely on behalf of the university. I also cannot make an opening statement, Chair, without reflecting on the hard work and commitment of so many people at the university, both in their work at the university but also through the community in membership of important bodies like the SES, St John Ambulance and so on. I think you have all read my statement and I do not intend to recite that. I am sure you will want to ask me questions about it.

The only other thing that I would want to say by way of opening is, I think we all understand how profound the events are that have given rise to today's inquiry. Certainly, we have felt that very, very deeply, and as you know we have done our best as an institution very much embedded in and of the community to respond to community need. To that end, you will have had a small sense in the statement of some of the things that we have done and some of the measures that we have taken over recent weeks. I simply wanted to explain the philosophy with which we've done that and then hand back to you, Chair. The philosophy was quite simple. We could not, at the beginning nor for quite some time, comprehend the full magnitude of what we were living through. We knew that, if we took a standard approach to decision-making and prioritisation, we would be well behind the curve. So we made a commitment very, very early on that, when we were approached for help, our answer would be "yes" and we would then try to figure out how we would bring that into effect as best we could. That's certainly been the creed by which we've operated since the beginning of this, and that continues. With that, I won't recite the remainder of the submission. You can see it's in three parts broadly. I hope it's been of assistance to you. I'm happy to take any questions you might have.

The CHAIR: Professor Carlin, I guess I'll open the questioning and throw to my colleagues afterwards. What has been the impact on SCU students and the staff at the university? What are the implications of the recovery centre, of government activity being there?

TYRONE CARLIN: I think there are, obviously, several dimensions. The university is deeply embedded in the community. So many of our staff and many of our students were incredibly deeply affected through the loss of their homes and all that they held dear. That's been an ongoing issue for us. Beyond that, when the first flood event occurred, at the end of February and into March, given the yes principle that I described earlier on, we were, in effect, obligated to close our Lismore campus to ordinary university operations—our teaching and, to a certain extent, our research. We did that because we needed to turn the campus over to community needs—the evacuation centre, the emergency services and then, as time went on, the schools, the healthcare organisations, other New South Wales government agencies and organisations, like TAFE.

We're now back on campus, Chair. We're able to offer the full on-campus experience to our students. We have some of our staff who are not able to work from campus at the moment, because we have given over a lot of the office space to schools and other organisations. Our staff have been incredibly supportive and understanding. That will be something that lasts for several months, while we continue to reconfigure the campus. From the point of view of the campus itself, it is, obviously, a very busy place at the moment, with lots of organisations, notably, schools and TAFE, there every day.

The CHAIR: I'll make this my last question. Have there been any impacts on students? You've come out of COVID. Then you hit floods. Has there been any impact in the area of the school year, completion of degrees, completion of academic activity on the campus? What has been the impact? What has been the response and the timetable?

TYRONE CARLIN: Yes. Broadly, we have maintained our academic calendar this year. We initially moved off campus for a period of about seven weeks. COVID, obviously, gave us a lot of practice at delivering education online. So we proceeded on that basis. The academic results that we've seen so far have been quite encouraging in relation to the capacity of students to continue to engage with their learning. Quite early on, when we set up some site access, particularly for those students who had no power, no internet connection and no capacity to really engage with learning from home, the feedback that I received from a lot of them was that they

absolutely really wanted the opportunity to continue with their studies, if for no other reason than it gave them something in their life to focus on, other than the events that were unfolding all around them. At the moment, we're broadly back to normal, if you can call it normal, in the sense that we're delivering on our core education, we're delivering research. But our campus configuration is radically changed. That will be an ongoing matter throughout this year and beyond.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Professor, could you just talk us through a little bit of the early week or two, the first week or two after the floods of 28 February. You are setting up the evacuation centre. You get an order from somebody to the SES to set up the evacuation centre. My first question is: Who gave you the order? Who was providing the coordination of that centre with respect to ensuring food got in there and supplies and bedding? Talk us through what that looked like in the first week or two.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Can we go back before that? Sorry. I'm hoping—

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Before the floods?

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Yes. Surely someone had reached out and said, "If this does come to be a flood event, are you guys ready to go?" If that goes to that question as well.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Yes. Let's do a whole time line.

TYRONE CARLIN: I'm happy to do my best to help you both. As I say in my statement, the university is regularly called upon to assist in these matters when there are natural disasters. That obtains, whether it's bushfires, whether it's floods. The memory of the 2017 floods lived pretty large in the lives of many of our staff. But I do say in my submission—I say this humbly and in a very direct sense—the university is designed to be a place for learning and research. It is not configured or designed in a specific sense or for a special purpose sense of supporting evacuation or recovery activities. So when we're asked—you'll please forgive me because there are so many agencies that we've dealt with over the past. I think the answer to your question is Resilience NSW is the central agency that would ask us to give access to our facilities. But—

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Did that happen? Did Resilience NSW call you as VC at the outset and say, "Will you open up your university as an evacuation centre?"

TYRONE CARLIN: Not me personally but the relevant executive. There was a lot of contact back and forward. We've done that before.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: That was Resilience. I guess that's what we're trying to clarify.

TYRONE CARLIN: I did not take the call, so it would be hearsay—

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Can we get you to take that on notice, please?

TYRONE CARLIN: I'm happy to do that. In any event, a call was made, and a response was given. The response was in the nature that I've described to you, which is, "Yes. How do we do it?" If I can just elaborate, given the contextual tenor of your question. This was done in circumstances where the rain was falling out of the sky in an extraordinary way. That had been a continuing state of affairs, where there was no power on campus, where telecommunications access was patchy at best and where, as those opening days went on, there was a very profound apprehension that, within a matter of hours, we would have no fresh water on campus. There were difficulties in accessing campus for quite a number of people. As you can appreciate, people come to the campus from all over the region. Lots of the roads were cut. Lots of the creeks were up. So in the early days we were very lucky in that we had a number of our key staff members who actually live within walking distance of the campus and whose path to campus was not impeded by floodwater. The campus is elevated relative to the CBD.

That time was a less orderly moment. It was an incredibly challenging time because of the magnitude of what had occurred, because of the level of the need that was obvious. To be really direct with you and to calibrate that for you—essentially, the entire executive leadership of the university and then some worked on this basically full time for many weeks. That meant action after action after action, change after change after change. You asked about other organisations. I call out specifically the incredible work that the Salvos did in bringing in food to the many people—we had 1,200 people on our biggest night—St John Ambulance, a whole range of those organisations. But the fog of war comes to mind to try to encapsulate some of the experience of that first week or two.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: You've mentioned the Salvos, NGOs, charities. At what point did government agencies either provide assistance, even maybe over however they could communicate with you and where the things were cut off as well? At what point was control taken over, for example, by the SES, by Resilience NSW, by the DCJ?

TYRONE CARLIN: I can only offer you an impression because I'm sure there's a formal answer to that in a strictly formal or legal sense. Many, many agencies were present early. The level of their presence clearly grew over time and in some instances that came down to the logistical challenges that I have referred to earlier on—the availability of actually getting places. I think my takeaway from it—for what it's worth—is that, best endeavours to one side, there was not perhaps the sense of authorised leadership in relation to those various agencies and there was not perhaps the degree of coordination that, with hindsight, we might have liked. We therefore found ourself in a position, which we were very willing and happy to take, of attempting to undertake some of that coordinating work whilst that capacity was being built up. There were times when—and look, we may have erred in doing this—if it seemed that there was perhaps a little bit of a gap, we just stepped in and did our best to fill that whilst, as I said, that capacity came onstream.

The CHAIR: Professor Carlin, when you're actually referring to the sort of authorised leadership, are you talking about a void of leadership from the State Government?

TYRONE CARLIN: I am not going so far as to say that. What I would say is, if you can put yourself in our shoes, because the campus became a focal point for so many of the activities that had to take place both to provide the basic shelter and the necessities of life, and then to establish the conditions in which the agencies could begin to bring their teams together, could begin to put infrastructure around them so that they could go and do their work, what we experienced was that we felt as though we were dealing with many, many, many different parts. Sometimes that made the facilitation of the role that we had to play perhaps a little more challenging than otherwise it would be. So I don't want to attribute anything to anyone except to say that our experience was lots of moving parts, a sort of a perception of a lack of capacity on the ground early on and a desire on our part throughout to have an authorised party with whom we could directly operate to cut through, get things done quickly, and to do that for the greatest effect for the community.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Thank you for your submission, and thank you to your staff for what was obviously an incredible series of events—that's probably the best way to put it. In your submission you talk about being involved in planning for the future. How much had you been formally involved prior to this event? So you said you had done bushfires and that sort of thing. Are you formally part of the local committees that operate to do this kind of planning? Would you like to be? It sounds to me like you need to be.

TYRONE CARLIN: I think it would be ideal if we were and I think what has been demonstrated by the events of this year is that we are able to create a layer of capability when it matters. To that extent, I think there was a very direct and obvious reference point back to us, even though I think we have to be clear about what our role actually is as a university which, as I said before, our mission is about education and research, primarily. But we're very realistic and we, as I'm sure many in the community, believe that this will not be the last of these events. I think one of the things that we have tried to point out, and I've certainly tried to underscore in my submission, is that forward-looking question of how could we do it better, not because we have ambition to supplant the role of those agencies whose job it is to do this work but because we very much believe that, whatever else happens, if there are events of similar magnitude, we will be asked to and we will step up in that facilitative role.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: But basically you need more of a role than you've had to date perhaps—given your experience and, as you've identified, probably likely to be called upon again.

TYRONE CARLIN: Yes, and that may manifest in a whole variety of ways. It could manifest in the way that you've suggested. It could manifest in the way that we think about some of our critical supportive infrastructure and how that is located and configured in future. There could be a range of outlets.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: I saw that and I've seen in your submission that you have already thought about that. In some ways, you've probably done your own review thinking about what the kind of infrastructure change would be. I don't know whether you can answer this question, but obviously that needs to be funded. I think your whole submission points to the fact that it's not really what universities are about but you said because you are part of the community. The funding for that, have you started to think about where you would get that? It looks to me that it is a State and Federal Government thing but going back to some of the events, I think, from Janelle Saffin earlier today, whether there are programs that meet that. To me, it looks like it's a very holistic and thoughtful idea about how you could upgrade your infrastructure, but I really struggle in terms of where would you be able to get the funds to be able to make that happen.

TYRONE CARLIN: I can help by telling where we might not get funds.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Yes. That's probably equally as helpful.

TYRONE CARLIN: Clearly, they would not in the main come from core university operating funds. I think one of the paradoxes that this reveals is that there is a very, very particular role for regional universities

and we're just one of a number of really special universities in Australia. Whether or not that has been wholly recognised in the framework for governing, funding and investment in universities, I don't think it has. So I do think that there is work to be done in partnership with the State, definitely, but also the Commonwealth.

The Hon. MARK BANASIAK: Thank you, Professor. I'm just picking up on the question from Ms Faehrmann. I was wondering if you could talk about the process of how you got approved or certified to be an evacuation centre because we've taken some evidence—extraordinary evidence—last night from a school who off their own bat said, "We'll take people. We'll take the community in." Then an hour later after they had taken people in, they were told, "Oh, no. You'll have to send everyone away. You're not certified." And then someone in the background, a mystery man, certified them quickly. So it was just bizarre. So I'm just wondering whether you could talk through the process of how you got approved or certified because it seems like this whole setting up of evacuation centres was just a dog's breakfast around the whole area for various reasons.

TYRONE CARLIN: Okay. Look, I can't enlighten you in the way that you might like.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Were you ever certified?

The Hon. MARK BANASIAK: Just enlighten us anyway. That would be great.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: You can take on a notice, if you don't know.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Yes. Please do.

TYRONE CARLIN: I'm happy to do that. But what I can say, just through lived experience, is that it has been customary that, in the face of these substantial disasters, the call comes to the university. I think there are two reasons for that. One is that we are blessed with a pretty extensive estate both as regards our land and buildings and people know by reputation that we are prepared to act to the community benefit. The second, which is highly pertinent in the context of what we've just lived through, is the university campus is measurably above the flood zone. It is known to be a safe area and there are axes of transport by road off the plateau, directly off the plateau, in and out of campus and in a number of other directions. So from the point of view of accessibility and from the point of view of safety and from the point of view of the physical capacity, I think those are all the factors that add up. The actual certification process, I can't speak to but I'll take on notice.

The Hon. MARK BANASIAK: So you can say, to your knowledge, in your time no-one has come and assessed the suitability of your site?

TYRONE CARLIN: Not to my knowledge. Not to my knowledge.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: My question just goes, really, to two things. One is a little bit similar following on. So, say, adaptation—looking for, making the university facility really fit and proper as an evacuation centre, knowing that it has been the evacuation centre for decades and decades. One of the things is whether or not it's been modelled that the lower-lying areas are above the probable maximum flood at 16.5 metres, whether that's something that you're calling for, whether that work's been done, et cetera. Secondly, which really is my main part, I understand that you have got a large high school student body at the university. What is your understanding about the time that is going to be there, how is that going and is that something sustainable and is that part of the adaptation?

TYRONE CARLIN: Thank you for your question. In relation to the topographical element of it, essentially the bulk of the university campus lands are substantially above what is regarded as a worst-case event, so we are very, very lucky in that regard. There is a small portion of one corner of the campus that temporarily flash-floods, but from the point of view of the capacity to operate the campus, that is broadly not an impediment. You talked about adaptation and some of the issues that confronted us. If I understood your question correctly, I think there were three parts; the third related to schools and others. Let me just address what I think might have been the second part.

If you are going to operate in these circumstances and you are going to provide critical infrastructure to people who desperately need shelter and safety and emergency services, there are some pretty fundamental basics you want: You want power, you want communications, you want drinkable water and all that goes with it. Each of those things was placed, for varying reasons, under stress during the events. We have a very, very limited back-up power capability on campus. It is not designed to power the campus proper, it is designed on a temporary basis to power our data centres in circumstances where we get a power outage for a few hours. I think, as everyone knows, even getting diesel fuel into the region for quite some period of time post-flood was incredibly difficult because all the roads to the north, the west and the south were cut, and you don't run generators without diesel.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: And the petrol stations were flooded.

TYRONE CARLIN: And the petrol stations were flooded.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Your generators are all diesel?

TYRONE CARLIN: Correct. Similarly, water—you can't shelter people without water. You can't talk to one another when the mobile network is out and there's no obvious alternative. We have documented in the paper—and I won't recite them further here, and we have provided this to Government—what we hope are thoughtful reflections. I will underscore; these don't advance our capacity to teach a student better or to do better research, and it isn't because of the university's interests that we have made these observations. We have simply made these observations and offered them to Government on the insurance principle, because we are fairly certain that there will be a point where we are asked to do this work again. Obviously, I have said emphatically that we will jump to it.

With respect to the schools, on the boundary of our campus, but on their own land, we have Lismore High School. We have Trinity Catholic College operating now in part of our campus and we have given over, in effect, our largest building to them so that they can bring their school community together as one whole. We are very happy that we are able to do that for them. Those of you familiar with the independent school sector in Lismore will know Living School. Living School also has been given basically an entire building. They have their whole school at the site. In addition to that, we've provided university land, which is contiguous to the Lismore High School site, for the purpose of building demountables. Those demountables are being used to house the students from Richmond River High, who obviously have been displaced because their campus has been devastated.

Personally, we would never have wished for any of this to happen. However, to the extent that it has and to the extent that we have those students, as well as TAFE students from Lismore now on our campus, it obviously raises in our mind questions about whether we could build something very integrated, very high quality, certainly more high quality than we would have ever done individually and sustainably. Education is where we began. Southern Cross University began as Lismore Teachers College. That's how we started. It is very deep in our DNA. It is core to who we are and our identity, and to the extent that we are able to bring together school education, technical and further education, and higher education in one place, even if that has resulted through tragic events, that is certainly an opportunity to reflect on.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: You have experience in Coffs Harbour on that, haven't you?

TYRONE CARLIN: We do. We have been operating a shared campus with TAFE NSW and the Coffs Harbour Senior College for almost 30 years. We are well familiar with integrated models and there are many virtues associated with them.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: As a vice-chancellor and an expert in education and research institutions, do you think this could be turned into an exciting pilot for our region where we do that integrated education?

TYRONE CARLIN: I do, and don't take my measured tone as a lack of excitement about that. I absolutely, genuinely do. To give you a sense of it, we are already talking with the schools with us about how we can integrate our research and really build those deep connections, how we can make sure that the students at those schools get access to the best of our on-campus talent and infrastructure. I think there is a really wonderful opportunity, albeit one that has come from adversity.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Are you talking to Education about that?

TYRONE CARLIN: Yes.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Where do all the mattresses and bedding come from?

TYRONE CARLIN: My impression is that in the main it came from the community. We received enormous amounts of donations of bedding, of clothing, of shoes, of any manner of things and we created distribution. I can't stipulate, but—

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: That's okay, perhaps you can take that on notice. I know there are sheets and everything is clean and organised. I just don't know where it comes from.

TYRONE CARLIN: My impression is, for whatever it is worth, and I will take it on notice, that the generosity of the community around us was—

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Amazing.

TYRONE CARLIN: —a very, very large source of that, and that was very humbling.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: There will be expenses for you providing that, making the space and services available, power bills, that sort of thing. Is there any recompense for that?

TYRONE CARLIN: We have not kept count. That has not been at the front of mind. You are right: There are and there will be. But we haven't really gone through that exercise yet. We just haven't had time. No doubt we will, and when we do, I hope that there will be an opportunity to have a sensible conversation about that. But that wasn't the motivation, I hasten to add, in anything that we have done.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: No, I would not suggest that.

TYRONE CARLIN: I know.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: I just wondered how that relationship works. You have got over 800 employees, mostly in Lismore. How many of your employees were impacted by the flood?

TYRONE CARLIN: We believe that 60 of our staff were out of their homes, at least for some period of time. I think of that 60 there are 15 to 20 where the loss was profound and ongoing. Beyond that, many of our colleagues have been involved in housing community members and other people who have been affected, and we've encouraged that. And, of course, if you think about the number of our students who have been affected in that way, it's some multiples of the number of staff.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Just coming back, as a major employer, I know some of the staff who have lost their homes are under a lot of pressure and are using their holiday leave at the moment, do you think there is a role for employers to assist with the employment arrangements for people who are in this situation?

TYRONE CARLIN: Our response in the immediate wake of this was—I will enumerate it along the following lines: The first thing that we did was we made direct financial assistance available to (a) anyone who was out of home and (b) anyone who helped anyone else to put a roof over their head. That was the first thing that we did. The second thing that we did is we immediately made community leave available to all staff, irrespective of whether they had been directly impacted so that every single person in the SCU community could get out, help with clean up, and that was 15 days of paid leave that everyone at the university had access to.

For those people who were directly impacted and lost homes, we made further accommodations. We made sure that they just could stay on paid leave for a substantial period of time—in some cases six or more weeks— whilst they went through the initial process. We adjusted their work arrangements so that they didn't have to worry about that and their colleagues stood behind them. We really, really tried to put a very, very human face on the way that we responded, because obviously the university is a community and we are made up of our people, and how we look after those is a reflection of who we are.

The CHAIR: Thank you for your time, Professor Carlin.

TYRONE CARLIN: Thank you everyone.

(The witness withdrew.)

(Short adjournment)

Dr JO LONGMAN, Senior Research Fellow, University Centre for Rural Health, University of Sydney, affirmed and examined

Professor JAMES BENNETT-LEVY, Professor of Mental and Psychological Wellbeing, University Centre for Rural Health, University of Sydney, affirmed and examined

Dr THERESE GROTOWSKI, NSW Branch Representative, Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists Section of Rural Psychiatry, and Member, New South Wales Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists Rural Psychiatry Project, sworn and examined

The CHAIR: Ladies and gentlemen, we'll resume proceedings. Under the provisions of this Committee, you may make a short opening statement if you wish to do so.

JO LONGMAN: Because James and I are from the same organisation, James is going to do our opening statement.

The CHAIR: Okay, and will you be making an opening statement, Dr Grotowski?

THERESE GROTOWSKI: I would like to, thank you.

The CHAIR: Professor Bennett-Levy, please.

JAMES BENNETT-LEVY: Thank you very much to the Committee for this opportunity. I'd like to acknowledge the extraordinary work of our local MP, Janelle Saffin, and also the amazing Indigenous leadership we've had locally with the *Koori Mail* and the Community Healing Hub, with Dr Carlie Atkinson as the coordinator there, and also the extraordinary work of Resilient Lismore in this community. As you know, we have a monumental housing crisis, a monumental mental health crisis and, I'd really like to emphasise also, an impending health and social care workforce crisis, which is very likely to add to the mental health crisis unless we address it.

We are in the position we'd rather not be of being the first centre in the world to have done research on a disaster-affected community which then gets re-disastered. In 2017 we undertook research on the 2017 floods. We did a six-month follow-up and a two-year follow-up. As far as this Committee's concerned right now, we want to highlight the fact that people who are displaced from home for more than six months have a very highly elevated chance of mental health problems. You could say around 40 or 50 per cent, at least, of those people are going to be having depression, anxiety, PTSD—some variants of those.

With the current floods, we have many thousands of displaced people—many thousands who go on being displaced for more than six months. We could estimate somewhere between 5,000 and 15,000, and this is the problem: We just don't know how many. This is really important because not knowing how many people are displaced, not knowing where they are or who they are, we're in this situation where our systems have utterly failed to track these people. They're the most vulnerable people, but we can't at this point in time project numbers. If we had the numbers, we could project pretty accurately what the expectations might be and what kind of funding would be required. But we simply don't have those numbers, so our capacity—the services have simply not been set up at this point in time to track the most vulnerable members of our community.

The second thing I'd just like to highlight is the impending health and social care workforce crisis. Our services, six to 12 months down the track, might be critically perforated unless we address this right now. Already these workforces, due to the housing crisis locally and due to COVID, were really thin on the ground, and then this has happened. A large number of those people have been directly impacted, and their houses. Others have got clients and friends staying with them. They're then in the position where they're faced with really very distressed clients, traumatised clients, the potential for vicarious trauma, absolutely, and the very high potential of burnout. Unless we have strategies to reinforce and replace some of those workforces, we are going to be in even more problems. Of course, that directly impacts on the clients themselves. I'll stop there.

THERESE GROTOWSKI: The NSW Branch of the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists welcomes the opportunity to address this Committee. We are both a membership organisation charged with training and governance research and medical specialists and advocates for people with serious mental illness. We've got 1,330 psychiatrists in the State of New South Wales and, as mental health clinicians, we are in a position to report on short- and long-term impacts of natural disasters, as Professor Bennett-Levy has also outlined.

In terms of the effectiveness of the preparation, coordination and response, I know that this Committee has already heard of the harrowing near-death experiences of many and the heroic responses of the local community. Major issues that were identified by our members and by our patients were telecommunication

failures impacting on actually warning people about the floods and then locating missing people, which has also been raised. We also have had significant issues finding suitable housing, both in the short term and the long term, for people. That's not just our patients but also our staff.

We've also got the ongoing uncertainty of Lismore's future, which is impacting on whether people feel confident moving back to their homes. There's been massive ongoing disruption of community infrastructure, and schools were highlighted. Many students are only attending school four days a week at the moment because of the lack of places in schools. It also has been identified repeatedly that there was a very uncoordinated response by the various systems to the flood. There's concern that the community's perception of the official response to previous floods, as well as these devastating floods, have led to a perception of injustice and, at times, abandonment. These, in turn, eroded economic and social resources and can, unchecked, lead to disadvantage and disconnection in the community—which were identified as significant independent risk factors for poor mental health.

The college has a position statement on mental health impacts of climate change and notes that natural disasters lead to increased rates of stress, depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, alcohol and substance abuse, domestic violence, self-harm and suicide, and certainly exacerbate existing mental illnesses. We've seen increased presentations of all these conditions within my services, and particularly PTSD, so the college advocates for decisive, timely, ongoing action to address climate change as part of that social contract.

COVID and affordable housing shortages pre-flood have led to a significant shortfall of clinicians, which was also highlighted by Professor Bennett-Levy, and that's meant that we actually have had a ward closed in the local mental health unit, and that predated the floods. Many local public and private health and support staff, including NDIS support staff, have been impacted by the disaster. There have also been substantial bureaucratic hurdles, especially in registering for housing and obtaining government grants, which are an ongoing issue which health staff are having to work with.

The college has developed a statewide coordinated disaster relief mental health plan. That advocates that we support the capability of the workforce within New South Wales; that we support collaborative planning and coordination for regions; that we support access to health services for rural and vulnerable populations, including children, older Australians and First Nations people, recognising that they do worst in disasters—those particular groups. We also would like to support the addressing of rural adversity and social determinants, which also have an adverse impact on mental health for our population. We'd also like to highlight that there are at least some alternatives to mental health care in terms of using technology. However, the Federal Government has seen fit to roll back some of the funding of those Medicare items, which has impacted on the ability of the local population to obtain services at this present time. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. You mentioned in your opening statement, Dr Grotowski, about the uncertainty of Lismore's future and how it's impacting on mental health of individuals. Can you explore that a little bit for us please?

THERESE GROTOWSKI: Certainly. People are not aware of what the plan is for the CBD and South Lismore: whether we're going to rebuild or not rebuild, what's going to be rebuilt, what's going to be zoned, whether houses are going to be bought back et cetera. People don't know what the town is going to look like in the future and that's very disturbing and distressing for them.

The CHAIR: What about the departure of young people? The mayor talked about—a number of employees have simply just disappeared. They've either left the region or moved to other places. How does that impact on young people?

THERESE GROTOWSKI: I think that the significant issue has been that our workforce has been drifting north for quite some time. Some of that is around housing; some of that is around the awards for nurses, for allied health staff and for medical practitioners. New South Wales awards are quite poor compared to Queensland. So that has encouraged the drift, which the housing issues have also encouraged. The problem is that, as our services become less staffed, they become less attractive to people because they are harder places to work.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Thank you for your submission. You're right. It's a very unusual thing. You've been able to already research the community so it's probably not so great a thing given what you're predicting is coming. Could you sketch out for me what the infrastructure around mental health support is currently? I suppose maybe just in Lismore, just as an example.

JAMES BENNETT-LEVY: The primary health network has been funded and got a lot of additional funds to set up for health at Southern Cross University, so that's the sort of immediate place to go. Obviously, there's the local health district as well but, as Therese has just said, it's already under considerable strain.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: So how many beds is it?

JAMES BENNETT-LEVY: Beds-wise I think you'd have to refer to the local health district for that—but basically looking at severe mental illness as far as those beds are concerned.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Dr Grotowski, you said that that mental health unit had closed prior to all of this—

THERESE GROTOWSKI: One of the wards had closed. The ward comprises a high dependency unit, a less acute ward for adults and then also a child and adolescent ward. So we've closed—I think it's 15 beds. Those have been closed prior to the flood because of staffing issues. COVID had been very difficult for us but even before that we were struggling to staff the beds.

JO LONGMAN: Can I just add something to that? I think there are a number of organisations, grassroots organisations and groups in the Lismore area that do a huge amount in terms of wellbeing of the community. I think what we're talking about here in terms of the infrastructure and in terms of mental health support is a particular kind of support, but I also think there are huge numbers of NGOs and grassroots organisations at the—

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: You're pre-empting my next question, which was just to get an understanding of the official health based—we went and visited Wardell CORE the other day. They talked a lot about the mental health support. They're just really lucky that they've got a volunteer who has got expertise in this who is doing an incredible job for no pay. I just want to try and understand, in terms of Government response—it seems to me that there's just not enough flexibility to provide even small amounts of funding for those community groups that are doing that kind of community wellbeing. We went past Trees Not Bombs before today. Clearly, people are going and being fed there. Surely there is kind of an opportunity there to have that conversation with people. I'm just wondering—there's a bit of that. Are you aware about how linked in that is and whether they're getting Government support? I think I know the answer to this, which is no. You're obviously seeing it. You've studied it. What are your suggestions about where we could enhance that kind of wellbeing outside of the formal infrastructure as well?

JO LONGMAN: I will take that first. We're aware that there may be some funding coming, which will help, because I think, particularly if you talk to Resilient Lismore—they talk a lot about exhaustion there amongst their volunteering community. Lots and lots of volunteers have come forward and have done amazing work but that is dwindling now because people are exhausted. And they're also dealing with their own trauma and issues around being flooded. James, I don't know if you want to add to that.

JAMES BENNETT-LEVY: I think it's important to understand the time course of response to trauma as well. Right now at this point in time what people need is what we might say "low intensity" support: somewhere to go where they can feel safe and secure, tell stories, share stories with others, be understood. It is not PTSD treatment time. That's way down the track. The community organisations are fundamentally important here. The community healing hub, for instance—I don't know if you got to see that. That was set up by Dr Carlie Atkinson, who's an Indigenous academic here in Lismore. That's been a fantastic resource. There's been a lot of—my partner is a naturopath and there's been a herb hub in Lismore. She's been part of that. People have flocked to that more so than any counselling or anything else. It's a safe place for people to go to get some naturopathic support but to tell their stories as well. It's those kinds of low-intensity, community-based services currently unfunded that are really important at this point in time.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Is there any research that shows where people have done that well in other places and if that does stop that pipeline of PTSD that is coming? Can we draw a direct line to that?

JAMES BENNETT-LEVY: It's a really great question. I'm not actually aware. Obviously, the research absolutely says community-led recovery plus, plus, plus. I'm not aware, quite honestly, of that kind of research. What we can say from our 2017 experience was that Helping Hands—it was called then—the community support service, was really fundamental in getting people back on their feet and was a safe place for people to tell their stories and so forth. I think we're seeing the same again here, but what we have here is just, as you all know, a completely different level. What we really have here is collective trauma. I now say to people that just about everyone is traumatised; it is just different levels of trauma and different levels of exposure too. But everyone is kind of under a cloud because we all have friends, we all have family who have been severely impacted and we have all experienced all the indirect impacts as well, which our research in 2017 found was also predictive of later mental health problems. Whereas in 2017 it was a limited number of people who were cut off from social and health care, for example, here just about everyone for a number of days and weeks and some people still now—some people are in communities that are completely isolated and roads are cut off, not having internet for weeks, food insecurity, petrol insecurity, diesel insecurity. Everyone got impacted at that level as well.

JO LONGMAN: Can I just add to that question about what we know about research? The 2017 research that we did in the Northern Rivers following the flooding at that point did show conclusively that particular social capital measures—informal social connectedness and feelings of belonging—were protective. We know that. So we know that mechanisms that help to promote connectedness and feelings of belonging are going to be protective in terms of people's mental health down the track. Those kinds of informal NGOs and community or grassroots organisations do a lot in terms of connecting people and giving people space to feel that they belong somewhere.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: That leads perfectly into what I'm saying, if you didn't actually answer it already. Going further back up the track, before there are mental health problems, what are some of the things we can do to improve the mental fitness or mental resilience of communities, not just following a disaster but so that when a disaster comes, they are at this level and not that level? Recently I saw a report about how important saleyards are for that reason because people are getting together and chatting. I think you just touched on it then, Dr Longman, about clubs, NGOs and community groups.

JO LONGMAN: Yes, absolutely. In 2020 the University Centre for Rural Health undertook a piece of research where we talked to rural communities in New South Wales about what they thought the mechanisms were that would help build community resilience to the mental-health impacts of climate change. That's exactly what they talked about. They talked about sport, they talked about various clubs, they talked about mechanisms for bringing people together, community picnics—all of those sorts of things that just provide a platform for people coming together, meeting one another and getting a sense of belonging. They were all exactly the kinds of things that they talked about, and nature-based activities. Land care, being in nature in some way in a group situation, is really beneficial.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Dr Grotowski, you touched on the tech care that government has moved away from. What specifically are you talking about?

THERESE GROTOWSKI: Recognising the issues that people had accessing mental health care during COVID, the Government created a specific item number under Medicare so that the payment when you did telehealth for people was the same as the payment if you did it face to face.[1] That meant that in rural communities, where we don't have enough psychiatrists, we could have services from, say, Sydney or somewhere providing services. More practically, what it has meant locally is that when people are not able to get out of their homes but actually have a functioning phone—when they or their doctor have been cut off because of floods—they can still get a service, and the Medicare item number exists. The Government wound that back pretty much at the time of the flood actually, or very close to it. The college has identified that a number of services in Sydney that were providing outreach to communities like ours are no longer providing those services because of that. So it's a further barrier when we've got far lower numbers of mental health clinicians on the ground in rural areas.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Professor Bennett-Levy, in your submission and in your opening statement you made the point about the fact that there are all these displaced people and the Government has no idea of how many, where they are and what their situation is. Would you care to make some recommendations about what should be done by government in the future to ensure that in natural disasters, climate-fuelled catastrophes—whatever we want to call them—people are case-managed, if you like, in situations like this?

JAMES BENNETT-LEVY: Right from the start, clearly, we need to be able to track people. Some people are going to show up for services immediately—show up to evacuation centres and so forth—and others will go to friends, family or whatever. What we need to be able to do is kind of do a snowball to find out from other people in that community—it might be something like a community organisation, like Resilient Lismore, for instance, which has a reach that is far beyond any of our services: 30,000 people on Facebook. We could track everyone through that, and still possibly could. Obviously, there are privacy issues and so forth. That seems to me about the only way we can actually track people now. So if there are community organisations that are prepared and set up for this kind of event, then we have a capacity to actually be able to track people. That's really what we need to be able to do.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Just to draw upon that, for governments to recognise or even acknowledge the demand for mental health services, the tracking of people is the first step.

JAMES BENNETT-LEVY: Yes.

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[1] In correspondence to the committee, received 30 June 2022, Dr Therese Grotowski clarified her answer: "The specific Medicare Item number is 288 and I should have stated that there was previously a 50% loading on that item number above face to face reviews".

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Is the New South Wales Government, for example, aware of how much demand there is out there for mental health services, not now particularly but in six or 12 months' time?

JAMES BENNETT-LEVY: Well, absolutely. Is it enough? Then there's the issue of what is New South Wales Government and what is Federal anyway, because the vast majority of people are going to be primary care, and it just depends on who is going to fund the community organisations that are really going to be the first port of call? It's those community organisations that are actually probably more in need of the funding than the so-called health organisations because that is where we have to—because we've got such huge numbers of people here, support at that level can potentially cut off a significant percentage of people who might otherwise be going to primary care services or secondary care services.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: I have one last question; sorry, there are so many. It is to you again, professor. Regarding the severe shortage of mental health professionals, in your opening statement you said that six to 12 months down the track our services will be critically perforated unless we address this now. Would you like to expand on what you mean by that and what impact that will have on the ground? Dr Grotowski, perhaps you may also want to comment on that?

JAMES BENNETT-LEVY: As to where we are at at the moment, as I said, we are already very thin on the ground but we are now seeing a number of people who have been directly impacted. Some 33 mental health workers in the local health district, for instance, were directly impacted—lost their houses. Three out of eight in another community organisation that I know about were directly impacted, so this is really hitting workforces hard. Those workforces are typically the ones that are actually in the lower cost housing, especially in the social care sector. To be able to sustain that kind of demanding work—vicarious trauma: You're working with people who themselves are traumatised. Burnout—it's not looking good at all. So we absolutely have to, at this point in time, start addressing this problem. Just looking at *Q+A* last week, the incoming child support Minister was saying, "Hey, in Melbourne we're having real difficulty finding childcare workers." In Melbourne!

We've got an incredible shortage of housing here. Who exactly is going to move here, unless they've got subsidies? The other way to go with this, I have to say, is—we're starting to do some thinking about this but, clearly, it all needs support. We have a significant number of people who've been unemployed as a result of the floods, obviously. Is there a way that we can transition some of those people who might want to work in the social care sector, that we can provide them with the kind of support and supervision and so forth that might enable them to be transferred? We either bring people in and support them to come in or we can somehow generate some shift within our workforce. But it's a big problem.

The CHAIR: Any other questions? We have reached the end of our session.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: There would have been a lot more questions.

The CHAIR: I do not think you have taken any questions on notice. Thank you for your time and your submissions.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

Ms CHRISTINA CLAY, Floodplain Officer, Rous County Council, sworn and examined

Ms BRENDA FORD, Operations Engineering Manager, Rous County Council, sworn and examined

The CHAIR: Under the provisions of this Committee, you are able to make a short statement, if you wish. Ms Clay or Ms Ford, would you like to do so?

CHRISTINA CLAY: Thank you, Chair. We'd like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land in which we meet today, the Widjabal Wia-bal people of the Bundjalung nation, and pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging. We'd also like to acknowledge the impact and trauma of the recent floods on the community we serve, particularly on the residents and landowners of the Richmond River flood plain. We are both here as representatives of Rous County Council, which is a unique organisation. Many people are unaware of the role of a county council. There's benefit in clarifying that first. A county council is established to provide a service to multiple general purpose councils. There's only nine county councils left in New South Wales. Rous is the only county council to provide multiple services as well as being the only one to provide flood mitigation. We provide bulk drinking water supply, weed biosecurity and flood mitigation to local general purpose councils in the Northern Rivers.

Our submission to the inquiry is based primarily on our experience and understanding as the appointed flood mitigation authority for the Richmond River, Lismore City and Ballina Shire councils as well as the regional water supply authority providing drinking water to these councils and Byron Shire Council. As the regional water supply authority, we maintain water supply to over 100,000 people during the recent floods, complying with the Australian drinking water guidelines without need for "boil water" notices. We attribute this to the individual effort of dedicated staff, luck and hypervigilance. We came very close to not being able to continue this supply. Despite our role in providing this service, we had little assistance in accessing remote and critical infrastructure and was not recognised as an essential service provider. We had the added frustration of miscommunication in the community, including confusing messaging about the integrity of Rocky Creek Dam and the ongoing quality of tap water.

As the flood mitigation authority, it is our experience in the Richmond catchment that who is responsible for flood mitigation here is not clear. There is no clear organisation and no whole-of-catchment perspective. We are both involved with the management and operation of existing flood mitigation infrastructure. We are concerned that there is no long-term strategic plan for the flood mitigation infrastructure that already exists in our catchment. In our day-to-day roles in flood mitigation, we are hampered by the inadequate funding we receive to maintain and operate our current infrastructure. Rous has inherited the legacy and responsibility for the majority of historical flood mitigation infrastructure that has been installed along the Richmond and Wilsons River. Rous is responsible for 80 kilometres of levees, 750 individual floodgates and 180 kilometres of drains.

Moving forward in the Richmond catchment, the State Government needs to clarify how flood mitigation will be undertaken here, what is the role of the flood mitigation authority and the general purpose councils. We need the State Government to provide a clear, long-term strategy for existing flood mitigation assets that we have inherited and adequate funding to maintain them. We welcome the opportunity to participate in today's hearing and share our experience and understanding with you all. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Clay, how do you interact with the State Government at the moment?

BRENDA FORD: I might answer that question. I work in both the flood mitigation and the bulk water supply part of our business. I assume that question is around the flood mitigation. For flood mitigation, we receive a grant for maintenance of flood mitigation infrastructure. That is one-to-one funding. The other part of that is funded by our constituent councils for the three areas that that covers: Richmond Valley, Ballina Shire and Lismore City. I will say that that funding is $84,600. That dollar amount has not increased since 1985.

The CHAIR: Less than a million.

BRENDA FORD: Eighty-four thousand, six hundred dollars.

The CHAIR: Sorry. I gave an extra zero there.

BRENDA FORD: I will take the million, though. No. Eighty-four thousand, six—

The CHAIR: Eighty-four thousand.

BRENDA FORD: And six hundred.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Hasn't increased since when?

BRENDA FORD: 1985. It's 37 years.

The CHAIR: What do you do with that $84,600? What can you do in flood mitigation with that?

BRENDA FORD: We also get contributions from Richmond Valley, Ballina Shire and Lismore City councils. That comes from their general funds for rate base. That's what we use for maintaining our levees, our floodgates and our drains and for—

The CHAIR: What's your total budget?

BRENDA FORD: I don't have that number off the top of my head.

The Hon. MARK BANASIAK: Can you take that on notice?

BRENDA FORD: Yes, I can take that on notice.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: I think what Rous does is absolutely incredible. I've been watching Rous like a hawk for the last 30 years. We heard quite a bit of evidence yesterday, particularly from canegrowers, about the dreadful state of the drains and that if the drains were maintained—the evidence given about the idea of maintenance was simple: excavate them, clean them. Some were "concrete them" in their wildest dreams. From your perspective as the manager and owner of those—I thought there was actually 191 kilometres of drains. Anyway, that was the map I looked at yesterday. Do you think it would have any real, tangible and substantive impact on the way those areas of the flood plain respond to the type of flood we've just seen in 2022 if those drains were maintained in a different state to what they currently are? That's my first question.

BRENDA FORD: I am a little bit nervous, so I have some notes if that is okay.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: If there is anything that we ask that you want to take on notice, you can do that.

CHRISTINA CLAY: Absolutely. While Brenda finds her notes, I think it is fair to say that the role that a drainage system plays really depends on the scale of flooding that we have. The flooding that we had in February, the majority of our flood mitigation assets on the Richmond floodplain were drowned out by metres and metres of water. Certainly when you get a flood of that scale, it doesn't matter how many weeds are growing in a drain. It is the smaller scale events and it is at the different ends or periods within a flood where that could be quite different.

BRENDA FORD: When it comes to cleaning the drains, while we have a large length of drain network that we maintain, there is a large portion of it that is also privately owned, but a lot of the conversation and a lot of the evidence and witness statements that you have received are around the outlets.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: I agree.

BRENDA FORD: So it is probably fair to say that that is what we are talking about in terms of how well that works, and in terms of how well those outlets worked and where the floodgates could or could not open because the outlets were clogged up with mangroves and sediment. One of the things that we focus on is being able to make sure that our floodgates can function. Like Christie said, on the scale of the flood, personally I do not see that the drains would have made a significant impact or difference to the scale of the flooding. When you start to look at the inundation time—how long it took for floodwaters to drain away—you then start to look at the question of, "Could the floodgates have opened earlier if there was less stuff in the outlets?" Basically, was that holding it back? I just want to point out that we had elevated river levels for an extended period of time.

Our floodgates are a form of one-way valve—they are a flap—so you need more water behind the floodgate than in front of the floodgate, and they will push open and pour out. When that river level is up, those floodgates stay shut and those drains fill up. The elevated river level had a much bigger impact on how long it took for drains to clear than any vegetation that was in any of those outlets. A lot of that was also debris that was brought down by the flood. A lot of the issues that we have had—and we have been going around in circles clearing out debris—is when we come back there is more debris. There is a lot of rubbish in our river at the moment.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: I have two quick questions and I will give them to you both at once. Do you have a functional relationship with Fisheries or is that experienced as a problem? And Rous's government structure—I am a lawyer with a long, experienced practice in this field; I struggle to navigate the governance—do you find that is a mechanism that is difficult in terms of the organisation culture and function?

CHRISTINA CLAY: I will take the Fisheries question. We do have a functional relationship with Fisheries. They are a regulator and they have a purpose. Often the activities that we do require permits from Fisheries. I am happy to say that we do have a functioning relationship with Fisheries. I think where that question comes from is probably some of the other submissions that you would have received, saying that the space that

we operate in, in terms of doing these regular maintenance activities, do tend to trigger a lot of environmental approvals. I have an environmental science degree; I understand the need for those. But to maintain publicly funded existing infrastructure is a lot of work. It could be streamlined and a lot better than it is. We could still maintain adequate approvals on the environment by doing that.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: I have quite a few questions.

BRENDA FORD: Sorry, there was a second question.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Let's keep going with that.

BRENDA FORD: In terms of the structure, our submission really talks a lot to the issue that we have with that. We are set up as the flood mitigation authority but we don't have responsibility for drainage. That sits with what we call the constituent councils, so with the general-purpose councils. But we also don't have ownership and maintenance responsibility for all of the flood mitigation infrastructure. We have some responsibility for some flood mitigation infrastructure, we have some responsibility for some drainage infrastructure and there is no clarity on what that means.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Rous is not on the disaster management committee for anywhere, by the sounds of it. Reading your submission, you were never contacted about the state of flood mitigation infrastructure, for example.

BRENDA FORD: I might talk to that by referring to the fires that we had in 2019. One of the things that we found with that was the fires that were burning in the Nightcap National Park came very close to our water treatment plant. We were really struggling with getting people to understand that we needed to protect that as an asset and that it was a critical asset in the network of critical assets in the communities that were under risk from fire. From that, we have representation on the LEMC at Casino.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: The local land management service?

BRENDA FORD: The local emergency management centre. When that starts up, we have someone who sits on that and it is primarily around our role as a water supply authority.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: In terms of flood mitigation, flooding is the major disaster we have in this region, and then in addition we need to supply fresh water to people who are in flood-impacted communities. I am stunned that you are not participating in terms of expert advice.

CHRISTINA CLAY: I think what that speaks to is the lack of clarity over who is responsible for flood mitigation in the Richmond River catchment. We are the appointed flood mitigation authority and we cover Ballina, Lismore and Richmond Valley, but on top of that you will find that Richmond Valley, Lismore and Ballina also do their own flood mitigation. Then, of course, we don't cover the entire catchment, so we have Kyogle and the other parts of the catchment that are also presumably doing flood mitigation in their area as well. It is very complicated, even for those of us who actually work in this day to day—Monday to Friday. It is very complicated for us to understand the parameters over who is responsible for different assets. Where does our responsibility end and start and where does a constituent council's start?

This arrangement in the Richmond has happened over many years. Since the first flood mitigation authority was established in 1959 in Richmond River County Council, the constituent councils have also always done flood mitigation. The problem is that it is not documented anywhere. The arrangements are best described as bespoke. When we have events like we have had, it adds to confusion. So during the event, after the event, who owns that asset? Who do I talk to? Who do I talk to about what are the future plans about flood mitigation? It is not immediately clear.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: When the councils are applying for funding for flood mitigation works, what is your role in relation to that? It is council-based, so Lismore will apply for funding.

BRENDA FORD: Lismore levee, if we use that as an example—

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: No, that is a really bad example.

BRENDA FORD: It is good to illustrate this point.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: It seems to be the exception to every rule, that's all.

BRENDA FORD: But it illustrates the point. Rous County Council are the owners of the Lismore levee. Lismore City Council identified a need for that and wanted to apply for funding and couldn't because they were not the flood mitigation authority. Rous County Council got the funding and built it, but Lismore City Council operates and maintains it.

CHRISTINA CLAY: Does that make sense?

BRENDA FORD: There is a memorandum of understanding between us, but that is the only one that we have.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: I get that, but the councils are applying for things as opposed to there being a strategy for the catchment. Would that be a fair comment?

BRENDA FORD: Yes.

CHRISTINA CLAY: Exactly. There is a piecemeal approach by the very nature of what we have. If you have a constituent council, say Ballina Shire Council, they are obviously restricted to within their local government area.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Caring about Ballina, but the water is coming from—

CHRISTINA CLAY: Kyogle.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Exactly. You would recommend, I would assume, a catchment approach to flood mitigation?

CHRISTINA CLAY: I think that there's probably a number of different models that we could take in the Richmond. But whatever model we take in the Richmond, it needs to be able to have a whole-of-catchment focus.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Yes.

CHRISTINA CLAY: And it needs to be clear, and it needs to be documented, and it needs to be well articulated and communicated to all of the stakeholders involved in a flood. So when we have a flood that happened in February, there is not this confusion over who do we need to talk to, or who is actually responsible for the levee that protects Woodburn.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Okay. I want to come to Woodburn. You say:

> When the Tuckombil Levee was going to be overtopped, putting the village of Woodburn at risk, Rous provided advice to Emergency Services. They did not understand our role, or our expertise and that advice was dismissed.

BRENDA FORD: I was trying to find someone to get in contact with about who we talk to—the warnings, obviously. Because we maintain and manage infrastructure all the way down, I watch a lot of the stuff, and I was following all of the warnings that were coming out and trying to work out what it meant for the communities that we serve. There was a warning that was continually coming out talking about Bagotville levee being overtopped, and I pick on that because I still don't know what that is.

CHRISTINA CLAY: Or where.

BRENDA FORD: Or where that is, or what they were trying to refer to. I couldn't get an answer. Eventually, I went on my personal Facebook page and tried to send them a message and say, "Where are you talking about? Because we need to clarify this." I still don't know the answer.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: So you don't have a direct communication with them during a flooding crisis?

BRENDA FORD: From our representative at the local emergency management centre, they were saying that there was no-one from SES there, so they couldn't ask them the question either. I don't know who I'm meant to ask and get clarity during an event on something like that.

The CHAIR: Sorry to interrupt. Who were you trying to make contact with in the State Government?

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: SES. They were trying to contact the SES.

BRENDA FORD: The SES. They were sending it—because there were notices going out about safe return, when you could see that the floodwater was still coming through and hadn't reached Woodburn yet. There were notices saying that a levee was overtopping, that I—like I said, I still don't know where that is.

The CHAIR: You mean a levee that you were unaware of? Were they referring to a non-existent levee?

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Perhaps.

CHRISTINA CLAY: We assume that they were talking about the Woodburn town levee that protects the village of Woodburn—

The CHAIR: So they got the name wrong?

BRENDA FORD: I don't know whether they were referring to the Bagotville Barrage or the Tuckombil levee, based on where they were talking about, and those things have different impacts because they're in different parts of the—

The CHAIR: So they didn't have any local knowledge? This is because they were in Wollongong.

BRENDA FORD: I don't know.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: The point then being that, when you try to just clarify this, there is no capacity to communicate directly, even though you are responsible for the flood mitigation. I'm so sorry, but this is just an extraordinary situation. In terms of Woodburn, have you any further comment about the impacts on Woodburn?

BRENDA FORD: No, that's all right. You keep going.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Okay. We have the maintenance and operation of existing flood mitigation. You seem to be distinguishing between existing assets and future assets and how that might operate. At the moment it's kind of an orphan system, is it, or a cut-off system, where you don't have a source of funds for it?

BRENDA FORD: I suppose the way I would word it is that we have existing assets which we can barely afford to look after, and that's what we focus on—is trying to look after those. I don't know what future—if there was to be future assets, I'm not sure who would look after that and how anyone would be able to afford it.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: And who would own them.

BRENDA FORD: Yes.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: What would be a way forward through these problems?

CHRISTINA CLAY: I think it comes back to those main points that we made in our submission. We need to have a clear lead organisation for flood mitigation in the Richmond River catchment.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Sorry. Before we get there, who decides that? Who is the person to make that decision?

CHRISTINA CLAY: I would say that it's State Government. I would like State Government—we would like State Government—to actually step in and come up with a model for the Richmond River. I think that we have been working with our current model since 1959 and not making a lot of progress with it in terms of clarifying those roles.

BRENDA FORD: We exist as a county council based on the State Government. So I think what that role is depends on the State Government.

CHRISTINA CLAY: So we need a clear lead organisation. We need to have a long-term strategy for the existing flood mitigation assets that we have. There's been a lot of discussion about what is the role of flood mitigation moving forward, what future assets might we need in this catchment, but I think we need to recognise that we have a lot of flood mitigation assets already in existence in this catchment, and to make sure that we have a long-term strategy for those. That is really important because we have a lot of assets where we have no information on what exactly they do, what level of service they provide, who are they providing that to. We have no information on how do we try to reduce their environmental impact. The environmental impact from our flood mitigation infrastructure on the Richmond River estuary is very significant.

Then we have the threat of sea level rise. We already have flood gates in the Richmond River estuary that do not open a lot because of sea level rise. And then, of course, we need adequate funding. So we put the figure on the table that the State Government has given us $84,600 for the last 37 years to maintain a huge asset base. Those assets are historical. Most were built in the 1950s and 1960s; some actually date back to the 1920s. The cost of keeping that infrastructure is not being met by the cost of funding that we are being given. They would be the three main points.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: That is a wonderful summary. Thank you very much. Can I ask one more question? The Rocky Creek Dam confusion—I got the message, the red alert. I don't know what that is. Do you want to just talk us through that? A lot of people are really wondering about that.

BRENDA FORD: Rocky Creek Dam, like all dams, has a dam safety emergency plan and it has thresholds at which point alerts go out: white, amber and red. That comes down to the amount of water that we had going over our spillway. That is an early warning system for residents downstream, to let them know that the dam is spilling and the level of that spilling. We definitely found that there was miscommunication, and we heard

a lot of stories of people talking about the dam wall overtopping. We heard stories of the dam wall potentially breaking or being damaged. That was never a risk.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: There is a lot of talk about this in terms of the flood language and just standardising what things actually mean. SMS is a wonderful way to communicate to a lot of people, but what does a red alert mean, basically, for the dam?

BRENDA FORD: I can take it on notice to give you the exact thing, and we can probably provide a copy of the dam safety emergency plan. But it, in effect, came down to the height of the water over our spillway. I mean, we ended up with—

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: So it was about the volume of water that was spilling?

BRENDA FORD: Yes.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Okay. Because I personally thought it was failing.

BRENDA FORD: No.

The CHAIR: We are almost near the end of our questions. If you want to take that material on notice and provide it within 21 days, that would be good.

BRENDA FORD: Yes.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: I have two follow-up questions. One is there is a lot of talk about the need for further flood mitigation. The CSIRO is perhaps looking—hopefully Rous will be consulted and have a role in that, but I don't think you have just yet. The Dunoon Dam has been flagged as a potential mitigation proposal. The idea that that catchment of Rocky Creek is something like 3 per cent of the entire catchment—just wondering whether Rous has a view on whether the Dunoon Dam is not an effective mitigation measure for the entire? Then the other question I have—I'm doing them both, again, because I know we're short of time—is the river. The river is the sickest, unhealthiest, saddest, heartbreaking thing that our entire region features through the centre of it. We've studied it to death, almost. In terms of the upper catchment, is there any major notable contributors to the ill health of the river that you guys are aware of, being sort of the experts in water and the river?

BRENDA FORD: How about I take the question on Dunoon Dam, and you can take the question on river health?

CHRISTINA CLAY: Done.

BRENDA FORD: I suppose in terms of the answer about Dunoon Dam and the catchment size, Rocky Creek is quite small in terms of contribution. Our existing Rocky Creek Dam has a catchment of just over 30 square kilometres. Dunoon Dam adds in another 19, so we get a total of about 50 square kilometres of catchment with the Dunoon Dam. Lismore—and I wrote these numbers down because I wanted to get them right. The catchment upstream of Lismore, which includes both the Leycester Creek as well, so Rocky Creek flowing into Wilsons and the Leycester Creek, is over 1,400 square kilometres. The catchment of the Richmond River, once you get down to Coraki and we're looking at that, is over 6,900 square kilometres.

I know earlier today that Councillor Mustow, who is our chair as well, spoke about the size of the impacted area for Richmond Valley Council and spoke about the catchment of Bungawalbin. Bungawalbin Creek comes into the Richmond River just south of Coraki and it goes out to Rappville. We have Rocky Mouth Creek near Woodburn that comes from New Italy into the Richmond as well. The Richmond River is a very large catchment, and when we have a look at that it is even more significant than the comparison of the catchment for Dunoon Dam to Lismore than the catchment of Dunoon Dam to the Richmond.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Just for clarity, is that answer suggesting that the Dunoon Dam would be insignificant in terms of mitigating flood impacts lower downstream?

BRENDA FORD: Dunoon Dam was proposed as a water supply solution and not as a flood mitigation when it was proposed. The 46 gigalitres that we had go over our spillway would have filled Dunoon Dam if it was empty, but that's what it would have saved.

CHRISTINA CLAY: Thank you for the question about river health. I have spent the last 23 years working in this Richmond River, trying to improve the health of our estuary. In terms of the major contributing factors, there are two main ones and they are priority actions in our draft scoping study for our coastal management plan. They are associated with the drainage of the lowest lying areas on the flood plain—back swamps, former wetlands. These areas are intensively drained and used for agriculture. This has happened for generations—this is not a new thing—but we have major water quality issues come out of these areas on a regular cyclic basis. We're talking about deoxygenated water, so black water from rotting vegetation from pastures and grasses that

now grow where it once would have been swampland and rushes. The other one is acid sulphate soils. We have acidic discharge leaving these lowest lying areas and going into the estuary. Those two main water quality factors impact on our estuary on a yearly basis. Going forward, they are two of the key priorities for improving the health of the Richmond River estuary. Of course, there are other impacts upstream, but they are by far the two biggest impacts on the estuary.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Does that include—

The CHAIR: Sue, we are over time. Ms Ford, I understand you took a number of questions on notice. The secretariat will be in touch. Thank you.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

Mr SEAN O'SHANNESSY, Presenter/Producer, 2NCR North Coast Radio Incorporated, River FM, affirmed and examined

Mr VINCENT STEAD, Committee Secretary, 2NCR North Coast Radio Incorporated, River FM, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: Good afternoon, gentlemen. Under the provisions of this Committee you are able to make a short statement if you wish. I emphasise the word "short".

VINCENT STEAD: For over 40 years community radio station 92.9 River FM has been operating in Lismore. Our role in a flood situation is to communicate information to the public. In a minor flood situation it is part of the protocol that the normal presenters, as part of their programming, give updates on what is going on with the weather, the road closures and such like. Our primary resources are the Bureau of Meteorology and the State Emergency Service. Our secondary resources are the Lismore City Council disaster dashboard, MyRoadInfo and by looking at the local community groups. If a moderate warning is given, the presenting is taken over by trained presenters and the normal presenters are asked to follow State Emergency Service protocol as far as getting to safety. Two presenters then stay at the station and give a rolling update of what is happening with the river heights, State Emergency Service warnings and Bureau of Meteorology warnings.

Yet this flood was beyond what we normally have. In the 2017 floods the water was up in the street outside the building that we are in—we are on the second floor. This time it came within six steps of coming in, so the water was approximately 25 feet deep around the building. We broadcast until 6.00 a.m., at which stage the meter box downstairs went underwater and we had to cease transmission because we had no power. Once the flood had receded we got a generator in and were able to start broadcasting information for recovery efforts—where people could get help and such like. In the second flood we had power at the station but the flooding affected Essential Energy and the Gundurimba area, where our transmitter is located. We were off air just after the flood had peaked. I will pass it over to Sean, who has some comments.

The CHAIR: How about we ask you a few questions and we will take it from there?

VINCENT STEAD: Yes.

The CHAIR: How does River FM differ from 2LM or ABC North Coast? What do you provide in an emergency that differs from those two organisations?

VINCENT STEAD: I think community contacts. We have got a very loyal base and a multicultural presence in the community. A lot of older people listen to us. We were instrumental in these floods in helping people by the fact that we've got up-to-date river heights and what is happening before the official information is coming out. A lot of people have got back to the station and said, "Thank you so much. We got out in time because of you."

The CHAIR: Mr O'Shannessy, do you have anything to add to that?

SEAN O'SHANNESSY: I would say a few things on that. One of the things that community radio provides that commercial radio and public broadcasters don't have is that direct connection in the community. There are really strong ties that Vince alluded to. We live in an era where everything is mistrusted, where institutions, the media and everything else are mistrusted. But people know who the people on the air are at River FM. They're their neighbours, their friends. They are listening in as a very loyal listener base, as Vince said.

The other thing we have is people, the volunteers, who are committed to their roles. Somebody like Vince here, and John Maloney, were there on the morning of the actual flood. The day before the flood, personally, I was cleaning out a friend's house, lifting stuff up to somewhere above where it came in 2017, listening to River FM as we went. John Maloney was on air. At one point—it must been about five o'clock in the afternoon—he said, "At midday, the height was this. At three o'clock it was this. Right now it is this height." While I was lifting boxes and stuff up high, I was able to in my head do the mental arithmetic that told me that it is coming up at about 20 centimetres an hour, from that information.

John is a complete flood geek. He is totally committed to this. Once the flood comes in, it is his self-appointed role and he is the best. He is the best in the region at it—at figuring out those figures. He gave me those figures in such a way that I could calculate that the flood was going to overtop the levee by between 3.00 and 5.00 a.m. I said that to the people I was working with. I said, "According to what we have just heard on the radio, we are going to have the flood overtop the levee at about three o'clock tomorrow morning." And that is exactly what happened.

The CHAIR: So do you believe that your coverage is more accurate than 2LM or ABC North Coast?

SEAN O'SHANNESSY: I didn't listen to 2LM or ABC, so I'm not comparing our coverage to theirs. But our coverage was so accurate, and sufficiently accurate and in depth and detailed, that you could make those kinds of calculations in your head as you went, up to the point at 6.00 a.m. where there was no more coverage. Suddenly, we were no longer providing that service.

The Hon. MARK BANASIAK: We took some evidence yesterday from another community radio station—I think they were from Byron—and they were talking about a different model of connecting with the emergency service providers for information. I think they pointed to a Victorian model where there is a more formalised relationship. So (a) are you familiar with that model and (b) do you think that is better way forward in terms of you getting access to that timely information?

VINCENT STEAD: We had a disaster training workshop. We had the SES come to the workshop and we got the numbers of people and contacts. Unfortunately, in the flood situation everybody is busy and nobody contacted us. In our strategy for moving forward, one of the things that we are going to be looking at is, rather than us trying to get through overwhelmed lines, we have a designated person who passes information to us. So unfortunately we are reliant on the information that everybody else has got coming via their Facebook page. Likewise, the road information is only updated every eight hours or so. So we are sort of running behind.

We've got our hands tied a little bit in that under community broadcasting rules we can only broadcast official information. So if Joe Blow rings us up from down the street and goes, "The water is up to here and it's coming into my house," we can't broadcast that. We can take that on board with the information that we've got. As Sean said, John has got a board with all the different river heights, and with experience we can tell, if the river is this high at Kyogle and this high at Nimbin, we know that that water is going to come down and affect us in Lismore. So there have to be improvements made as far as communication, but we had done the groundwork before the flood situation happened, and it is just a matter of improving the performance in the future.

The Hon. MARK BANASIAK: I think the evidence we received was almost like the community station being able to reach in and get the information itself and not having to sit and wait for someone or even call someone and say, "Hey, can you give us this officially?" They would be able to reach in and tap into that information straightaway. Is that a model that you guys would like to see? Obviously with some sort of service agreement set up between—

VINCENT STEAD: We were told when we had the workshop to not ring them when they were in the crisis mode. So, as I said, it has got to be that they send the information to us, and I think the model where the SES goes, "Look, this radio station, that radio station, that Facebook page and that should be sent information that they need"—it is something that has got to be worked out.

SEAN O'SHANNESSY: Could I just say that what I think we need is some sort of centralised hub of information which is accurate, which is timely, which is complete and which goes both ways. As we are saying, there is a lot of local knowledge which we are privy to, which the authorities, as you say, based in Wollongong or wherever—the agencies—don't seem to have access to. So it would be helpful if there was a two-way street in that kind of system, from my perspective. I don't know the Victorian model that you are referring to in detail so I can't comment on that.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: You were referring to John?

SEAN O'SHANNESSY: John Maloney.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: And he predicted it accurately?

SEAN O'SHANNESSY: He didn't predict. He just gave the figures. He just gave accurate information. I was able to do the mental arithmetic myself. Anybody who can do mental arithmetic could have worked that out.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: What was that information that he had access to?

VINCENT STEAD: That's the river heights from the Bureau of Meteorology.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: So the calculation that he was able to do in his head was more accurate than what the bureau was doing?

VINCENT STEAD: No, the river heights of the bureau are very accurate to a point.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: That was the problem as I understood it.

VINCENT STEAD: But you can look at the river heights in the different areas, and then you can press "table" and it shows you the river heights.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: That's my question. Where is that information available? What is that source of information?

VINCENT STEAD: The Bureau of Meteorology.

SEAN O'SHANNESSY: From the bureau.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: So the bureau publishes those tables.

SEAN O'SHANNESSY: Yes.

VINCENT STEAD: Yes. It is a continuous 24-hour thing that is going on.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: So it's using the same information as the bureau?

VINCENT STEAD: Yes.

SEAN O'SHANNESSY: Yes. But it's the presentation. It is the capacity to be able to say, "This is what it was then. This is what it is now." Just in a five-minute presentation or less, he is able to get across to me or anybody who is listening enough information to be able to make your own projections. I wasn't getting that from any of the other media outlets, to be honest.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: No, I know. Are you allowed to make those projections?

SEAN O'SHANNESSY: He wasn't making any projections. He was simply stating the figures from the past. I'm allowed to do mental arithmetic while I'm out there preparing for the flood. That's what I did. But anybody who can do mental arithmetic could have made that projection at that point. It's just that he gave the information in such a way that it was actually usable.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Is what you are trying to say that it was the hyperlocalness of providing the time and the effort to go into the bureau's data to extrapolate that on the hyperlocal level, and that's because you've got hyperlocal people sitting there knowing that you're talking about communicating to people in the Lismore Basin about the Lismore height et cetera?

SEAN O'SHANNESSY: Yes. John knew enough and had enough experience in doing this that he was able to actually present the information in such a way that, as I keep saying to people, anyone who can do mental arithmetic could figure out for themselves when the levee was going to be overtopped.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Then why did the SES get it so wrong?

SEAN O'SHANNESSY: I'm not party to the SES's processes. I can only speculate, but I would guess that they are in Wollongong. And there is talk in the community that the reason why what we used to have was much more accurate information in a much more timely manner from the SES—but they no longer are based in the local area, so all sorts of strange artefacts of distance seem to creep into their analysis and projections.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: We have actually asked them some of these questions before. We had them in front of us at one of the committees and they said, "Well, the BOM got it wrong."

VINCENT STEAD: Well, the BOM did get it wrong in the second floods, in the fact that some of the measuring devices were affected by the first flood, and then they were broken from the second flood. But it is every 15 minutes you can see it tick over and it changes the number. You can press a button and get a plot or a table that tells you exactly where the river height—

SEAN O'SHANNESSY: For each actual measuring station along the river you can get that day.

VINCENT STEAD: A little bit of local knowledge goes a long way in that we are able to look at it and go, "If Nimbin is getting hammered by rain, we know that within two days that is going to end up in Lismore and likewise Kyogle."

SEAN O'SHANNESSY: Another example of local knowledge: If you know that the farm dams are all full and starting to overflow, then you know that the next thing is that the rivers are going to start rising. If you are a local, you know whether that is happening or not. You can't tell that from Wollongong.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: The timeliness of information is my question. You said that the gauge readings were updated every eight hours. Is that right? Is that in real time?

VINCENT STEAD: No, that's the road information. The actual gauges are every 15 minutes.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Can you access that information?

VINCENT STEAD: Yes, you can watch it live.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: One thing I could not understand on the ABC was when they were reading their script, which would go for 10 minutes, some of the information was more than 24 hours old, which isn't very useful.

VINCENT STEAD: That is a big problem across the board, especially after the initial flood. A lot of the information—because everybody is busy. The SES are not really worried about what is happening with the river heights because they are trying to save lives. That is their primary focus in a flood situation. I am not sure there shouldn't be someone who is attached to the SES who is in charge of the monitoring of floods and giving accurate information. This is just anecdotal from Facebook, but there was a picture on Facebook of the SES getting briefed by the Bureau of Meteorology, and that was right before the second flood when the SES said to everybody, "It's safe. You can go back in."

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Yes, "Come out", "Go back", "Come out", "Go back."

VINCENT STEAD: I was in a difficult situation because I was on air and a Facebook post came from the SES that said at the start of the post it's safe to go back to the central business district. At the bottom of the post was an evacuation order in place that you're supposed to be out by four o'clock from the central business district. A bit later there was another post, "It's up to you whether you believe the weather or the river heights. You make up your own mind, but we're saying it's safe." I've been on air and I said, "Look, I am reading you the official thing that is in front of me now from the SES." I said, "Pay attention to the disclaimer at the front. It's up to you." At the end of it, I said, "This is my opinion; I repeat, this is my personal opinion. If you're in the central business district, get out."

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Do you have a copy of that post, by any chance?

VINCENT STEAD: No.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: What can the New South Wales Government do to better support community radio stations to provide the critical service that they are clearly providing to local communities? What would be your ask today to this Committee?

VINCENT STEAD: Reliable electricity.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Maybe go a bit more ambitious than that, if you like.

VINCENT STEAD: No, truly. When the power went out for the first floods, it was our duty to get on air as quickly as possible. We financed $2,500 to buy a generator, went down to Ballina, loaded the generator in my van and brought it back. It has been over 2½ months, and that was with the support of Essential Energy and the support of Janelle Safin to get back the power back at the station. We've only been able to broadcast eight hours, eight hours, eight hours a day.

SEAN O'SHANNESSY: Twelve hours a day.

VINCENT STEAD: Twelve?

SEAN O'SHANNESSY: Between 8.00 a.m. and 8.00 p.m.

VINCENT STEAD: I have eight on the brain because I have to start the station at 8.00 a.m. in the morning.

SEAN O'SHANNESSY: This man has done heroic work. He would never sing his own praises, but this man has done absolutely heroic work for River FM, as has Merella Curtis. Starting and stopping that generator every day was absolutely arduous. I had to do a little bit of it to fill in from time to time. It was bone-wearyingly depressing to have to get in and do another day where you start and stop this generator.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: But there's more to this then, isn't there?

SEAN O'SHANNESSY: Yes, there's a lot more.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: You're saying electricity, fair enough, but that's at the end, the very last bit, of a potentially good natural disaster response plan for you to be seen as a critical part of and resourced accordingly. That obviously hasn't happened now. You're here telling the Committee your worth in terms of what you do, but is there anything else that you wish to request?

SEAN O'SHANNESSY: Could I have a turn at that? I would say there are a few things. Communications, obviously—like, we need to be integrated into the communications with all of the emergency agencies as equal partners in that as an emergency broadcaster. The communications across the region went down. We had phone towers—everything went down. Our station went down because of power and also because of internet connections. We were unable to connect to our transmitter in any case even if we had electricity. So both

of those critical infrastructure issues need to be resolved. For a community radio station to function in the situation where we are—and I think probably across the board in any given emergency—we need independent power supplies. We need a power supply that is independent of the grid. The grid goes down, which it did here and it has done it again just yesterday, so it has been pretty unreliable. We need to be able to go, "We're going on no matter what."

The other thing we need to be able to make that function is independent communications—communication systems that are independent of the terrestrial NBN and independent of the 3G, 4G and 5G phone tower network. We need satellite uplinks that we can actually manage to get our information out to our transmitter. That would be pretty basic, I think—the communication culture and communication infrastructure. We also need to be able to have our studio mobile. We need to be able to go from the location that is disaster affected to a more appropriate location where infrastructure is available. That is another way in which we could actually manage that process, but I think that it would be a good fail-safe backup for us to be able to have. So what we already have, which is an outside broadcast system where we go out and do events et cetera, but one which can independently communicate with our transmitter from wherever we are. We need that kind of upgrade to our outside broadcasting system. I think any other community radio station in the country would be well served by having that access to that kind of infrastructure on tap in a few boxes.

Quickly, the third point that I have, which I think we need the State Government to address, is we need better staffing. We currently have an administrator, who is our manager, basically doing the work of essentially two or three full-time people on a 0.6 position. We have one tech, again very much on a part-time basis, who comes and goes in between three other jobs that he does. And we have nobody who is dedicated to actually being production staff. We don't have somebody who is there to support and maintain the production values and to train other volunteers and provide them with support. It is a voluntary organisation. Most of the presenters—Vince, John—these people who did heroic work, were actually there for over 24 hours, continuously keeping the radio station—

VINCENT STEAD: It was days.

SEAN O'SHANNESSY: Go there for days and days. Nobody is paying them to do that. There is no support and no resourcing for them to be doing that. Vince won't complain about it because he's a Trojan, but, really, people deserve to get better resources than that. We need to be able to get training and support to increase our capacity for news gathering and sharing, and that requires a certain amount of infrastructure and resources. Also, networking with other community radio stations would be another valuable point in which that production staff could actually fulfil the role there.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: You also mentioned a contact in the SES in real time.

SEAN O'SHANNESSY: Vince mentioned a contact in the SES. I think we need a comprehensive range of communications cultural change.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Yes. There isn't a strategy, is there?

SEAN O'SHANNESSY: There is no strategy, as far as I can tell. There is an idea that we should present this sort of information and we were given the training, which was great and it was a great first step. Our emergency broadcast training went for a day or half a day or something.

VINCENT STEAD: He did an excellent job.

SEAN O'SHANNESSY: He did a great job of presenting the material that he presented.

VINCENT STEAD: And the SES lady was very good too and we got a number.

SEAN O'SHANNESSY: All very helpful, but when we said—

VINCENT STEAD: But when we rang from the station—

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: During the actual emergency.

VINCENT STEAD: —all lines were totally busy.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: We are nearly out of time; we have half a minute. I'm pretty sure the radio station physically used to be based at the university. If we had the probable maximum flood of 16.5 metres, you would be flooded where your current premises are. Is that something that perhaps you would think about—being relocated to a safe, secure place where you could have more guarantee of constant network and electricity?

VINCENT STEAD: Coincidentally, we were supposed to have a flood debriefing meeting today, after this. Unfortunately, the manager is crook, so it is on next week.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Do you pay rent?

VINCENT STEAD: Yes.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Okay. And so, that is one of the reasons why you are in the building you are in and not somewhere more flood-proof?

SEAN O'SHANNESSY: Because it is cheap. And that's right; if we had proper resources to be able to make that move and to pay for the rent on an ongoing basis, then moving the station would probably be the smartest thing to do. Staying where we are will require upgrading the building and the power supply and the comms, as I just listed before. Either way, there is going to need to be some money spent on it.

VINCENT STEAD: We have spent some money improving the transmitter, but what needs to happen is that there needs to be solar power at the transmitter that flicks on when the mains cut out. We simply have not got the money. A lot of our sponsors were taken out by the flood. The chances of getting more sponsors locally are very low at the moment. We are running a gratis news service where we are listing the businesses that are open.

The CHAIR: Gentlemen, thank you. You clearly love your community. You are passionate, and we thank you for your service.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: And I love your T-shirt. It is Resilient Lismore. It is a beautiful T-shirt.

SEAN O'SHANNESSY: Thank you. I handed around a copy of our submission, which we didn't get in due to—

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: That's fine. We will still take it. It's not like homework.

The CHAIR: Thank you again.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

Dr BRUNO ROS, Senior Veterinarian and Director, North East Equine Veterinary Services, affirmed and examined

Dr PHILIPPA JOHNSTON, Veterinarian, Tenterfield Veterinary Clinic, sworn and examined

The CHAIR: Hello. Under the Committee's rules, if you wish to make a short statement, you may do so. Would either one of you like to make a short statement?

PHILIPPA JOHNSTON: Yes, that would be great. I am not very practised at this, so bear with me. Thank you very much for allowing me to appear at this hearing. I was directly involved, alongside Bruno, in the animal welfare and veterinary response to the North Coast floods. As a veterinarian, I followed the correct albeit convoluted pathway to register and participate on a professional volunteer basis. Professionally I experienced a poor animal welfare response from the Government and a lack of coordination between the Government and the private sector operators and the community. In regard to the overall effectiveness of the flood response, I believe the scale of the animal welfare event was underestimated, especially by the Government, particularly in the initial stages. There was a complete reliance on and a subsequent failure of that 1800 number in the start. There was either a complete lack of overall aerial surveillance or a lack of communication of any surveillance.

Our Veterinary Practitioners Code of Professional Conduct outlines that we must always have a primary concern for the welfare of animals, including the provision of first aid, treatment and euthanasia in a timely manner. Unfortunately, government veterinarians and departments were not able to provide this in the recent floods, exhibited by the delayed provision of food and veterinary attendance to stranded animals, particularly in reference to the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Regulation 2012. As a result of that delayed government response, we formed a privately funded veterinary group to provide animal welfare and veterinary attention to that area. Government agencies had helicopters on contract yet grounded, and we were unable to utilise these resources. Instead, we had to enlist private helicopters to conduct aerial surveillance at our own cost. There needs to be tasking of appropriate helicopters so that we can be confident that aviation support is available for animal welfare purposes.

Owners of stock focus their entire lives around the provision of animal welfare, and when they required urgent help, they were failed by the same body who enforces such rigorous animal welfare laws upon them. Perhaps sometimes we underestimate the importance of animals and livestock to people's mental health. The gratitude and hope that the public expressed when we could save a life was immense, as was the grief and the mental anguish associated with deceased animals and with the lack of formal identification of these animals. In summary, my three main government-related concerns are animal welfare breaches, delayed response and lack of communication. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, doctors. I am going to ask some very direct, brutal questions. Was your animal welfare activity mostly euthanasia of stranded or injured animals?

BRUNO ROS: Not mostly, no. There were obviously significant numbers of animals euthanised, but I think the majority—I do not know if we have the raw data on that. But I believe the majority of animals that were seen, especially—it was mostly cattle and horses that we were doing. I believe they were treatable, and I think we did that.

PHILIPPA JOHNSTON: Yes. There were over 250 cases that we saw. The reason I looked to Bruno to answer that question was because I was not involved in the initial first day of surveillance. There were not as many euthanasias; most were treatments. The primary concern, as well, was fodder.

The CHAIR: Fodder? Did a lot of animals starve to death?

PHILIPPA JOHNSTON: Look, that is an impossible question to answer. We could say, from the emotional side, "Yes, definitely. We could have saved them." We do not know, because the government response was so delayed. Our private helicopters were doing fodder drops prior to the LLS.

The CHAIR: I want to take you to fodder drops. We keep hearing this phrase over again: the lack of coordination. Was there a lack of coordination involving fodder drops to stranded animals that were isolated?

PHILIPPA JOHNSTON: Yes.

The CHAIR: How did food get to those animals, if it got to those animals?

PHILIPPA JOHNSTON: Initially, in the first five to six days, it was by private operators with donated hay, primarily, especially via the river. On the Saturday morning it was via private helicopters.

The Hon. MARK BANASIAK: We heard in a separate inquiry into the approved charitable organisations, the RSPCA and the Animal Welfare League, that the Animal Welfare League's mobile vet truck was quite helpful in this situation. That committee has now made a recommendation for the Government to fund more of those. Did you have any experience in utilising or being part of utilising that truck? Is that something that you think there needs to be more of? Did you have experience in it? And is it something that you would support in terms of having more of those trucks available to be rolled out?

PHILIPPA JOHNSTON: There was a chain of command. It went DPI to LLS to AWL to Vets Beyond Borders to volunteer vets. It was too convoluted. AWL was great.

BRUNO ROS: Yes. I was there from day one. I believe the AWL truck arrived on the Wednesday. We have that in the notes there. They were awesome, particularly their CEO—and I think he should be named—Mark Slater, who I believe has since been moved on for whatever reason. He was awesome in terms of making things happen on the ground, getting me in contact with people who he believed could assist us. Where there was a vacuum from DPI and Government, him representing AWL was awesome. We could have done with several more AWL trucks because especially the small animal clinics around the area were inundated and overwhelmed. One thing perhaps that we could improve is to have more large animal vets attached to AWL, and that is a very easy thing to do. I think that the idea of that mobile vet truck was awesome, immensely valuable to us and we could almost have them still here now because we still have ongoing issues here.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Thank you very much. I have read both of your submissions and I think that what you were able to achieve under what was obviously extremely trying circumstances is really to be commended. I know you do not want thanks for that, but I am very interested in the series of failures that occurred. You basically had to do the workaround with every government department. That is my reading of your submission. I know that you were visited by very senior people in DPI and the Minister at one point—I think on 9 March, so a fair way into this. There were some promises made there. But I wanted to check that nothing really changed from there.

PHILIPPA JOHNSTON: No.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Did anything change?

PHILIPPA JOHNSTON: The only thing that changed was on 10 March Lara Johnston got in touch with Simon Oliver. Once that got into place, yes, things started to change then.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Things like the red tape. On 9 March you finally got the RSPCA after you contacted the ag Minister directly and they were there but they could not go in the LLS helicopters. Is that correct?

PHILIPPA JOHNSTON: That is true. What happened yesterday is I attended a DPI meeting, which as a group we were actually not invited to attend. I managed to get in through the AVA liaison, which had nothing to do with this situation. At that meeting yesterday, Leigh Pilkington presented a time line of all their events. I said, "That is wonderful. Can I get a copy of that?" to bring to you today. He emailed me today and said, "Sorry, there were some errors in it." That was a professional meeting yesterday. He said, "There were some errors in it. I only did it quickly last night. I will not be able to have it in time for the hearing." This is a prime example of what we copped the entire way through and are still to this day experiencing.

BRUNO ROS: If I can probably go back from the start, as far as I know, I was the first large animal vet roaming about. There were probably several reasons for that. One was that our property and where I work was not severely directly incapacitated like other vet clinics; it has issues now. On the Monday I could get out limited. By the Tuesday evening I got into various parts of Lismore. As far as I know, when I treated the horses on the Tuesday night, they were the first flood animals treated by a vet that I am aware of. By the Wednesday, I was in Casino and through local contacts was aware that hay was incoming to then be distributed. That is when the 1800 number I believe was activated. I then frantically started ringing that hotline—I have lost count of how many times—seeking who was in charge of the veterinary response and who was in charge of the animal welfare response.

On every single occasion my call for more information was denied because of privacy issues. I was not given ever the coordinator's contact, name or number. I asked numerous times that my contact was escalated to the very top and that they contact me; it was never done. We were on the ground with limited to no resources. We did not know anybody was coming. We knew hay was coming. How was that hay going to be distributed? We did not know. Nobody, to my knowledge, was contacting anybody on the ground. A few other private vets then started to arrive and try to get out on boats and access, particularly, horses to start with. But at no point in time did anybody from DPI—that 1800 number, the ag ministry—ever contact me on the ground despite numerous attempts that this information was critical so we could at least launch a coordinated response to this.

Might I add, when they finally did arrive some six days later, their arrogance—certainly to me because I had probably been fairly vocal in my criticism of them by then—towards me as a vet on the ground who had been seeing this for already five days now was breathtaking, absolutely breathtaking.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Was the DPI meeting yesterday like a debrief on what happened?

PHILIPPA JOHNSTON: Yes, it was supposed to be a veterinary debrief. I requested Bruno to be involved and they—

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: That was declined.

PHILIPPA JOHNSTON: Declined, yes. From yesterday, in the introductions, I found out we actually did have a liaison LLS veterinary officer who was initially appointed that and none of us ever knew. I actually found that during the introductions yesterday. We had been dealing with her but information was still being—

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: But she never told you that this was—

PHILIPPA JOHNSTON: No, and information had still been withheld from us.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: I just noticed your comment, Dr Johnston, in your submission which was about the ease with which private vets could get involved. You take us through this very convoluted system. There is Vets Without Borders but there is no involvement of the Australian Veterinary Association.

PHILIPPA JOHNSTON: No, not at the moment.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Could you provide some thoughts and reflections on that? Importantly, how does that get fixed?

PHILIPPA JOHNSTON: With the emerging animal disease side of it, which the DPI CVO—Chief Veterinary Officer—is involved with, they then immediately activate the AVA. With the emergency response, there is none of that. The DPI CVO is not actually involved in the emergency response in regards to animals. Our proposition is basically to have AVA involved and to be involved from the start. They are the best organisation.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: So they are never involved. For example, in bushfires, which were a couple of years ago now—

PHILIPPA JOHNSTON: No.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: It makes me so angry reading both of your submissions, and we have actually all talked about your submissions and we cannot believe the situation, to be honest. Going to the hotline, Bruno, you indicated that it was established for people to call a couple of days after the floods hit and that there was no way for people to know what that number was. Do you know anybody who was able to receive assistance from the hotline? Did it work? Was anybody able to reach anybody, say that they have seen animals in trouble and assistance was able to get to those animals?

BRUNO ROS: There is so much I can talk about the hotline. The hotline was established. Initially I was given the wrong phone number. I then put that over Facebook. Dare I say, it is the quickest way to get these things around. The issue is that so many people who need the assistance are not on Facebook. The average age of primary producers I think is 55-plus and they are not on the internet. They did not have power.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: There was no internet.

BRUNO ROS: They had no means. There were no telecommunications. On one day—I think it was the Thursday or the Friday—there was no phone service in the greater Casino-Richmond Valley area. The hotline, I believe, was a brand-new number established for this event. I don't know how that information started getting out. Private people obviously tried to disseminate it as quickly as possible. The entire failure of the 1800 number is that it requires somebody to locate the animal. It requires somebody to have surveilled the area to actually spot an animal that needs fodder or veterinary assistance. That person then has to ring the hotline, has to lodge a request, tell them where it is. The hotline then, I believe, assesses whether that is aerial support or whether it can be accessed by road and then it goes through a process of assessment as to what resources are thrown at that.

The whole issue with that is we had cattle stranded. Any number of places you can think of, there was cattle there. They were on the sides of roads that were just—you'd have a piece of road the size of this table and you'd find a couple of cows there. There were horses on balconies. There were cattle washed up in any number of places. Nobody knew they were there. We saw them from a helicopter.

They were on islands. There were dead cows up trees; obviously, they were long gone. But the issue is you can only find out this information through aerial surveillance. So the notion that a farmer—who a lot of them

were evacuated, they weren't on their farms, so these farms were empty of people—that if somebody was to spot these cattle, ring the hotline—sometimes you didn't have phone service or you didn't have electricity to charge your phone to ring—if someone was to ring the hotline and then fodder would be assessed to get out there—and remembering DPI did not show up until minimum five or six days after the event.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Do you think that potentially there really wasn't anybody within DPI who was coordinating any veterinary response? You were the first person on the ground responding. You were unable to talk to anybody, really, from DPI. To get no response, there was some hotline that nobody could really connect with. Do you think they were actually doing anything in those first five days?

BRUNO ROS: I questioned—obviously, Dr Johnston here was at this meeting yesterday that I'm not privy to and she'd been given a time line of which the initial parts of that that I've seen I questioned most of that because I've got photos of when things were happening. So I questioned most of their time line—

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Exactly.

BRUNO ROS: —in that initial three and four days. I've got no idea who was there, who was in charge. This time line that they've since produced in retrospect seems—I think it's full of holes because, in that initial period of time, if there was a coordinator I cannot see, as a private vet here on the ground, why they would not have contacted, taken my call, to actually get some on-the-ground information of what was going on.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: So there is no evidence, is there—

PHILIPPA JOHNSTON: No.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: —that within DPI there was anybody working on the emergency veterinary response for the animals in these floods?

PHILIPPA JOHNSTON: In hindsight, I think that was an LLS veterinary officer that we were dealing with, Jocelyn Todd, who was the liaison. In hindsight, now I know. I went that correct pathway and I still received no instruction, no daily updates and no information was given to me.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: So the animals in this region were abandoned by the New South Wales Government during this emergency.

PHILIPPA JOHNSTON: It appears so, until at least a day.

BRUNO ROS: The first vets on the ground were all private vets and there was an initial view to put their hand up and announce that they were here. Our biggest restriction was our accessibility to where the animals were. You either could only get there by air or boat and nobody knew they were there. The only reason we knew they were there was through aerial assessments with people who were out in boats finding and letting us know where they were.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: So injured cattle, injured horses, starving cattle, starving horses—the whole thing—

PHILIPPA JOHNSTON: I've got pictures.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: —Government, just zero response.

PHILIPPA JOHNSTON: Yes.

BRUNO ROS: There's numerous videos and photos, some of them I've made public, but they are the most extreme breaches of animal welfare that I think you could possibly come up with, taking into account that some of these animals during their displacement have washed through floodwaters, we don't know for how long and how far; and then what's worse still—and there's an image that I think should be disseminated, and it's probably one of the most heartbreaking—which really riled me initially, there was a farmer downriver at Coraki and he'd made a sign in his paddock that said "Hay"—H-A-Y—and he made that out of corrugated roofing iron that had washed onto the place. He had no phone service, no electricity; nobody was coming to their aid, so he was cluey enough to write a sign, a big sign, out of corrugated iron saying "Hay". Our helicopter that we'd organised spotted that. It landed to let him know that help was on the way and, to me, the fact that a DPI helicopter had not seen that days before is a grotesque and pathetic response by them. There's no other way to put it.

The CHAIR: Can we have a copy of your aerial photograph?

PHILIPPA JOHNSTON: Oh, I've got heaps here. You can have them all.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

PHILIPPA JOHNSTON: You can have the whole pile.

The CHAIR: We'll take them, thank you.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Thank you, Dr Pip and Dr Bruno. I know how much work you did and I spoke to Oliver throughout the effort that you guys set up. It was phenomenal and thank you because there would have been so much more suffering without you. Do you think that it's fair to say now, on reflection, that there is a system that needs to be designed and implemented for the next time—because there will be a next time—

PHILIPPA JOHNSTON: Yes.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: —and that that is actually about immediate response and significantly improved networking and communication with respect between the existing private vet network on the ground and the Government vets? Is that actually the answer to avoid the welfare issue again?

PHILIPPA JOHNSTON: Yes. Yes, I think it is. We've got the New South Wales legislation in terms of the prevention of cruelty to animals and that says within 72 hours—you know, fodder, treatment, to be provided within 72 hours. So it is that real initial emergency response that needs to be designed, and if it wasn't so convoluted I think it would be a lot more clear cut. So, if it did go directly to AVA to private veterinarians, that would be one suggestion of mine. It would be much less convoluted and easily communicated, and to have an liaison officer in the AVA who is also in direct contact with DPI and to say, "Right, this is your funding that you get initially. If you need anything more, you know, approach us." However, I think there needs to be a system, an approach or a plan set up to say, "This is what's going to happen", and to be disseminated prior to the next emergency.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: So an emergency plan and strategy with a plan with all of the right people—

PHILIPPA JOHNSTON: Yes.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: —and then we can be better.

BRUNO ROS: All the resources exist. I'm led to believe that the Government sits on or has on contract a fleet of helicopters that they can call upon rapidly. That was not done, certainly for the veterinary-fodder response. There's countless numbers of private veterinarians that put their hand up and would do that every day and night of the week to go to any area in the country to respond.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Yes.

BRUNO ROS: At the end of the day, DPI don't have clinicians. They have got limited vets through DPI and Local Land Services. At the end of the day, they're not clinicians and likewise I'm not a government vet. So, if we could all get along and work better, more closely together, in rapid time all the resources are there. It's a lack of communication. I believe it's arrogance from—or certainly I think that's come up through listening here before even through SES. There seems to be an arrogance of government agencies to accept outside help. Now, whether that is through legal ramifications, I'm not sure. So there's so much, I think, that needs to be freed up to even just to the acts of allowing private people—be it, say, the private vet—into a DPI-tasked helicopter to get up and do things.

Ultimately, I don't think DPI have the on-ground free will, if you would put it—so as in, for instance, are you going to have a government vet going down a flooded river on a boat, trying to get to a stranded animal? I'm not sure. There's probably a whole bunch of red tape that would prevent that from happening. Private vets were doing it. I think all the resources are there. It needs to be activated faster with much better communication and coordination and have just a very simple—a very simple—chain of command with on-ground local knowledge, probably providing a lot of information on that. Because we had all the information initially. We had garnered so much information through, initially, aerial surveillance, calls coming in. DPI didn't really want to have any of that information.

PHILIPPA JOHNSTON: We had two LLS veterinarians at our meeting and one of those was the liaison officer initially on that Sunday, and we didn't unfortunately hear back from them again.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: I am sorry. Did you say, "liaison officer"?

PHILIPPA JOHNSTON: Yes. She was in hindsight, yes.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: In the Hunter region?

PHILIPPA JOHNSTON: Sorry, it's the LLS veterinarian liaison officer.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: In LLS in Richmond?

BRUNO ROS: Based in Grafton, I think.

PHILIPPA JOHNSTON: She's based in Grafton.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: What is the role of the chief veterinarian?

PHILIPPA JOHNSTON: The CVO with the DPI?

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: In this whole process. Now that you have had time to reflect on it—

PHILIPPA JOHNSTON: In the emergency?

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: —is there a role for them? They clearly played no role.

PHILIPPA JOHNSTON: If they probably mirrored the EAD—the emerging animal disease side, which is completely separate—to an extent those protocols, plans are in place for that side of it, it would be reasonable to say that that may be appropriate for the emergency side as well.

The CHAIR: Thank you for your evidence and your time. Did you take any questions on notice? No.

PHILIPPA JOHNSTON: The only thing, there were a couple of facts that we have now found after, from the DPI meeting yesterday. Would I be able to collate them quickly and send them in, in the next 24 hours?

The CHAIR: Absolutely, we would like that. Thank you.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Can I just ask one final thing? Is there a need now for mental health support for the vets after what you have been through? Are you noticing that amongst your colleagues?

BRUNO ROS: Ultimately, I suppose you get by trying to help the livestock owners, farmers, horse owners. Sure, I guess I keep in touch with a few of the vets, but you see bad cases of things every day. This was just massive, overwhelming numbers and just a truly, truly overwhelming event. There is no other way to put it. In terms of me personally, I think I'm okay. I reflect on things nearly every day. It's just beyond frustrating of the entire system and the process, hence why I will be continually fairly vocal of criticism of that, because something—so much has to change from so much of the response from so many agencies to this.

Things have to change. And if there's anything to come from these hearings, it's listening to the people on the ground who have lived through this, went through this. A flood will happen again, whether it be the same, bigger or smaller. The real issues right now, I believe, certainly are with the farmers who have gone through all this—and that's a whole other conversation—but that's where the major issues are still ongoing and I think will continue to get worse over the next few months.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Finishing that point, it compounds the trauma, having the exclusion of the vets now based on the meeting yesterday, that sort of thing? There is a compounding impact?

PHILIPPA JOHNSTON: The event itself is awful, but the fact that we didn't get government support was what made it even harder.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Yes, I hear you. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Dr Johnston, you mentioned that you were interested in providing further materials to us. If there is anything involving the DPI meeting or any further materials that you think are relevant, please provide them to the secretariat. We would welcome that.

PHILIPPA JOHNSTON: Yes. Thank you.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

Ms BETH TREVAN, Coordinator, Lismore Citizens Flood Review Group, sworn and examined

Mr ED BENNETT, Member, Lismore Citizens Flood Review Group, affirmed and examined

ED BENNETT: I take this opportunity to mention that although I am a member of the group that Beth chairs, I am also a long-time member of the SES going back until Civil Defence days in 1964. I am the flood intelligence officer at Lismore City SES, but I am not here in an SES capacity. I am here because I have been able to contribute a lot of data about flooding to Beth's committee.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mr Bennett and/or Ms Trevan, if you would like to make a brief opening statement you are able to do so. Mr Bennett, you are not making a statement?

ED BENNETT: No, I'm happy for Beth to do it.

BETH TREVAN: Thank you. The Northern Rivers is a very high rainfall region where there is a short time frame of eight to 12 hours before Lismore is facing a major flood. Blanket statewide SES policies and procedures do not work for our community. In responding to the terms of reference I will say both the SES and Resilience NSW agencies were unprepared for the February 2022 event. Genuine leadership is lacking. Since the 2017 flood the SES has focused inwards with a restructure and internal staff relabelling, but no effective change to capability delivery. Consequently, in the February flood the incident management team was overwhelmed and focused upwards to headquarters and the media, leaving local volunteer units with little or no support.

There was a failure of leadership and planning exhibited by Resilience NSW, with ineffective coordination between the SES and Resilience NSW during the transition from rescue to recovery, and this left a vacuum of more than 48 hours when the affected community and liaising agencies were left stranded. Resilience NSW did not operate as the lead agency for recovery, for which they are responsible. Internal cohesion was low, resulting in a split functional management arrangement with the police. This caused internal friction and dual reporting lines and communication systems between the police and Resilience NSW, which saw the organisation slow to make decisions and slow to react.

The role of the SES headquarters is to support the volunteer units and ensure they have sufficient personnel and resources to provide the best possible outcome for the community. In the February flood when the SES headquarters management and resources proved inadequate, help was sought from the local communities. The role of Resilience NSW is to ensure a smooth transition from rescue to recovery and provide the recovery service to meet the needs of the affected community. Unfortunately, from the outset systems were not operational and staff member numbers were so low that the liaising agencies outnumbered the Resilience staff, resulting in considerable disorganisation. The community is not interested in who manages each section of disaster management; they just want it to work. At the State level, the battle for power, control and resources amongst emergency management agencies continues, and coordination with the assistance offers from Federal agencies have been refused.

All policies and procedures should be designed to create a seamless transition from the affected individual community member through local, State and national government agencies. The involvement of the ADF is absolutely imperative from the moment the Bureau of Meteorology predicts a major category flood. Communication with the public is hampered by inter-agency communication systems that are unable to talk with one another, disrupting workflow. The combined BoM and SES system of warnings and bulletins to the public is too slow, with information often out of date by the time it is broadcast. The community requires local information gathered from throughout the catchment, broadcast by local SES personnel on an hourly basis, from the very first early warning to the peak of the flood. That is how it worked very successfully for generations until the introduction of the control of all messaging from State headquarters.

The proven VicEmergency EM-COP system implemented following the Black Saturday royal commission, or a similar system, would resolve most of these communication issues within and between all agencies and for the community. New South Wales emergency management agencies cannot agree on using this proven communication system. To date there has been no effective action on issues of importance to the community, as noted in multiple reviews and inquiries. Issues include early warning, local information, community information, the 132 500 hotline, community difficulties within and between agencies and inter-agency territorial issues. Whilst the State-level agency staff struggled, and rivalries and communication systems hampered decision-making, frontline volunteer units and the community joined forces and got on with the job, saving many hundreds of lives. Large numbers volunteered their boats, homes, food and clothing and assisted with clean-up. The increased involvement of the military and their resources was essential to the success of the rescue and recovery phases.

In other related matters, the royal commission showed that the New South Wales emergency services were the least professional in the nation. Successive New South Wales governments have not taken emergency services seriously enough. Lismore is the most at-risk community in the entire nation and, currently, the response is reactionary, not appropriately planned. It's time for New South Wales to develop an emergency management and recovery system that works.

The CHAIR: That was quite an opening statement, ma'am.

BETH TREVAN: I tried to keep it to three minutes; I'm really sorry.

The CHAIR: No, I was referring to the content and how straightforward and how tough you were. How do you feel about Resilience NSW? You talked about dual reporting lines, slow to make decisions. Did Resilience NSW get in the way?

BETH TREVAN: I think the major problem, from what we've heard from various agencies that were directly involved, was that they were either chaotic; "disorganised" or "shambolic" were other words that were used. They just didn't seem to be planned. There were insufficient staff and, for days on end after they took over, it was a real problem.

The CHAIR: What did the professionals in the community do and feel when they encountered this?

BETH TREVAN: Despair, utter despair, because they were dealing with all the various people on the ground who were suffering and the system just wasn't working.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: What role did you play during the floods, Ms Trevan?

BETH TREVAN: I'm a community member.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: I'm sure you weren't just sitting there.

BETH TREVAN: No, in our family situation, we had three metres of water through an industrial estate. We've been dealing with the aftermath of that for the last three months. Like everyone else in town, it's ongoing. But we still have a roof over our heads, so there's no complaints.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Thank you, and I'm sorry to hear that. Mr Bennett, I know that you're not here in your capacity as an SES volunteer. Everywhere we've been, people have recognised those that were there did their best in really difficult circumstances. What is your reflection on what went wrong and, in addition to what Ms Trevan said, what needs to change?

ED BENNETT: I don't think much went wrong from the point of view of the SES response. The task was simply so great and our resources were so small, relative to what was needed. We had access to a total of 17 boats that went out on the water, not necessarily all at once but at various times. But the community response was such that—I don't know if anybody counted them, but the number of tinnies and little fishing boats and kayaks and jetskis, I would guess, was probably at least 50. As Beth said, without that community response, the situation in terms of people being stranded and quite possibly lives lost would have been much greater. In order for the local SES unit to cope with a flood such as this, we need possibly five times as much equipment as we have and five times as many people to man the boats. Given the constraints of funding and the problems in raising enough volunteers, if we had a repetition of a flood of this magnitude, I think the result would be very similar to what happened three months ago.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: How many volunteers did you have three months ago?

ED BENNETT: It varies a bit. We have about 80 active volunteers on our books. A few of them at various times during the flood were busy trying to save their own premises. I think about five of our volunteers had their houses inundated and, like a lot of other people, suffered massive losses. In my case, after being on duty for about 12 hours, I handed over to one of my colleagues. I went home at about half past 10 the night before the flood peaked, only to be awakened by a phone call at about 4.30 from somebody who needed some information. I looked out the back window and I thought "Oh, hell, look at the water coming up." I thought our house was always flood free—well, it was flood free—and the water came about a foot below the floor. I've got a little bit of understanding of the stress that people went through, because at one stage I was sure the water was going to get into my place, and then I was absolutely marooned for a couple of days.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: I might just briefly explain: I requested this because the citizens' review from the 2017 flood, which I've read, reviewed the multiple inquiries. I can only describe it as the most eminent, knowledgeable citizens of Lismore in the amount of consultation that was done to bring it together. I'm stunned that you've produced another report in this time frame, and I thank you for that and congratulate you. The community feels that many of the errors made this time are a carbon copy of 2017. Reading what you're saying

about the turnover in personnel, the restructuring and the lack of continuity in emergency services, you've been trying to lobby for very clear-cut recommendations since 2017. My heart breaks for the frustration that you must feel, but why do you think those simple reforms were unable to be implemented and the same mistakes were made again?

BETH TREVAN: I think people in government positions believe they know best and that the local knowledge is of no consequence, whereas it's absolutely critically important in our particular situation, where you've only got that really short time frame. We tried several times to ask the question, "What are you going to do when the whole coast is in flood?" Because that's happened many times before and we couldn't get them to understand. Well, I suspect they understand now because that's exactly what happened in February—it was the whole coast from the border right down through the metropolitan area and further south. And whether some of the staff were being held back because they were concerned that they weren't going to have enough statewide staff to actually be able to support the units further down the coast, I don't know.

But the situation here is very different to anywhere else in the State. You would see in the last report that our recommendation is that we should be dealt with absolutely differently to anyone else. In fact, our recommendation would probably be that we'd be a very good pilot project to completely look seriously at the way emergency services work, and that would include Resilience NSW. All these agencies have a system and make the community fit their system. The whole thing needs to be turned upside down, where the focus of every policy and procedure must be based on the community, and built from that particular point.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: You would agree that the expertise is in the community here; it's not in Sydney?

BETH TREVAN: Absolutely. We've listened all day to the presentations here. The amount of knowledge that Ed has is unbelievable. Yet the agency itself doesn't appreciate the level and amount of knowledge that he has. Quite frankly, what happens in a time situation—the SES is totally reliant on what the BOM says. I suspect it's because they're concerned and the risk side of things controls everything that they do, but the time lapse is so great that by the time a lot of the bulletins are put out the situation on the ground has changed considerably and they are out of date.

The CHAIR: You would have heard the evidence from the local community radio station, River FM.

BETH TREVAN: Yes.

The CHAIR: They said that, in fact, some of the announcements were 24 hours old.

BETH TREVAN: Some of them would be. Part of the dilemma there is that often those bulletins are put together by people who don't know. It wasn't just the big flood. We have multiple floods. We have small floods, big floods, localised central town floods and there's a whole range of varieties. But just as an example of local knowledge, last February—12 months—we had a moderate flood and Ed was contacted by the SES salaried staff to ask what he thought the peak was going to be. Ed said, "The peak will be 7.4 metres." "Oh, no," was the response. "We're talking with the BOM and they've said it's going to be 8.5. You'll have to raise your prediction." And Ed's response was, "Well, I'll raise it to 7.5." "Oh, no," was the response. "That can't possibly be right." So the BOM ended up broadcasting or giving the SES the information that it would be 8.2. It came to 7.44.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: And the ABC—the local broadcast is obliged to use the SES script, isn't it?

ED BENNETT: Yes. They don't do any of their own research into what is happening. They just rely on information that's fed to them.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: So there's really no method whatsoever—people who are in the know locally realise this information is incorrect. People up in the catchment are ringing, saying, "The water is poring over my verandah. This has never happened." But there is absolutely no opportunity to correct or to influence what people honestly believe is incorrect information that is then broadcast to the community. I just think this whole warning system is so critical because everything then gets harder as the crisis hits harder and the logistics become harder.

BETH TREVAN: That's right.

ED BENNETT: Yes. For many years, for decades, the situation has been that the BOM is the official provider of information and forecasting and predicting heights and so forth, and the SES—through the chain of command, so to speak, down to the local area—disseminates that information. The BOM doesn't write a report specifically for our catchment. They provide general information about what's happening with the weather and forecast predictions for the flood height. Then that has to be written in a form with reference to local place names

and areas. That's done locally at the SES. We've got two SES locations in Lismore. There is what used to be called the Richmond-Tweed headquarters in Goonellabah just up the road here and then there's the Lismore city, the local SES unit, down near the river.

Everything comes from the BOM to SES headquarters to the local regional or zone headquarters and it is the people there who put out the local warnings. We have nothing to do with it. However, after the 2017 flood we, partly due to the effect that this group had—local SES units now can approach the media and put out factual information about what's happening. We are not allowed to do any predictions because that's the job of the BOM, which is fair enough. There have been a number of occasions when the local ABC radio has rung me, or whoever is on duty, to find out what we think is happening.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Actually happening.

ED BENNETT: And that's an improvement after the 2017 fiasco.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Can you just say what some of the errors were in 2017? I know, for example, they muddled up two river systems in the warnings.

ED BENNETT: I have a four- or five-page report on the 2017 flood, which is headed, "Some thoughts on what could or should have been done better to manage the flood of 31st March 2017". Unfortunately, my secretarial skills are a bit lacking and one page is upside down and they're a bit out of order. I have several copies.

The CHAIR: If you wish to table it, we can re-staple it. Don't worry about that.

ED BENNETT: Okay, that's fine. It'll save me the trouble. Just getting back to the question, the biggest problem in 2017 was that an incident control manager was brought in from Dubbo who had absolutely no knowledge of local conditions. Under the SES protocols, he was supposed to liaise with the local unit, who are stationed at zone headquarters. He was supposed to liaise with the local unit to take advantage of local knowledge. He did, but his parting response at the end of a very short conversation was—excuse the language—"Bugger that, I'm doing it my way." He issued an immediate evacuation order whereas an evacuation warning should have been issued. He issued an immediate evacuation order 11½ hours before the levee overtopped. The river was only about 6½ metres when he issued the immediate evacuation order. I don't know if it was panic or what.

BETH TREVAN: Ego.

ED BENNETT: We realised then that the levee was going to overtop. What should have been done was word should have gone out: The levee is expected to overtop at about 4.00 a.m. tomorrow—this was at 4.30 the previous afternoon—here's an evacuation warning. At an appropriate time, perhaps about midnight, an evacuation order will be issued. Then people could evacuate and leave the CBD several hours before the levee overtopped.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: The sense is that there were massive avoidable property losses because the evacuation order was too early.

ED BENNETT: Absolutely.

BETH TREVAN: Absolutely.

ED BENNETT: There hasn't been an estimate but possibly tens of millions of dollars would've been lost because of that.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Unnecessarily.

ED BENNETT: There was one case where a man who had opened a coffee shop only a few weeks before the flood thought that it was the right thing to do to obey the evacuation order. He left without lifting anything up, and he lost something like $55,000. Whereas someone else who had been here through multiple floods—

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Ignored it.

ED BENNETT: —said, "Ho-hum, evacuation order. If you don't mind, I'll stay and lift my stock up," and didn't lose anything.

BETH TREVAN: Having said that, though, once the evacuation order is given, our understanding is that, by law, workers compensation insurance coverage is no longer on the staff. So if the employer does not ask the staff to leave immediately after the evacuation order is given, then if anything happens they're in trouble. Of course, those who did stay to pack up were there on their own or they had to get all their families in to do something about it. There was a slight improvement this time. But with the second flood in March, it was equally confusing, with the way the evacuation orders were going on and off. The biggest problem is the fact that we've spoken with the BOM and they tell us that it is not possible for them to produce their information any quicker than they do at

the moment, which is why they're always behind. It takes a couple of hours for them to look at the information, put it through their various systems and then be able to put the warning out.

The Hon. MARK BANASIAK: I have one quick, final question. After the evidence we've heard from you—which is a clear dissection of the issue, particularly about Resilience NSW—I'm left wondering whether there's any shape or form in which Resilience NSW can actually function properly. Is it just a failed concept that we should walk away from? Should we look at a different model?

BETH TREVAN: If you look at the recommendations we've made in our latest one, we think both the SES and Resilience NSW should be completely looked at, and our recommendation is by an international expert. Bring someone in internationally who is very, very experienced in both the management of the disaster as well as recovery and see whether they can be brought together in a much more suitable and sustainable way. Because it would seem our area is always going to have floods.

The CHAIR: Thank you for your time, your efforts and your years of experience.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

Ms NAOMI MORAN, General Manager, Koori Mail, affirmed and examined

Ms ELLY BIRD, Coordinator, Resilient Lismore, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: Under the provisions of this Committee, you are able to make a short opening statement if you wish. Either both of you can or one person can.

NAOMI MORAN: Thank you. Jingi Walla. Tonight I speak on behalf of the *Koori Mail*, a 100 per cent Aboriginal-owned organisation that has been providing a flood rescue, relief and recovery hub for 13 weeks since this tragic event destroyed parts of our region. I speak not as somebody whose day job is to provide rescue, relief and recovery but as somebody who leads an Indigenous organisation that has a cultural responsibility to care for our Bundjalung people and region during this time. In addition to this, we have a cultural responsibility and right to have a seat around any table where discussions are had about the protection and care of our lands, which we know is vital in ensuring that this region does not continue to suffer drastically by these disasters.

The *Koori Mail* took the initiative to act quickly to take care of our communities during this time, with a focus on our Indigenous communities situated on the outskirts of the Lismore town and region. Our hub was set up by the *Koori Mail* staff and still is, maximising our organisational and staff relationships with individuals, organisations, business, philanthropic donors and individual donors from around the nation who have provided invaluable support to the *Koori Mail* to enable us, in turn, to support the Lismore community. Primarily, this has included a food and supply bank; medical centre; emotional and wellbeing centre, supported by counsellors and psychiatrists; access to a free clothing, bedding and baby supplies shop; a kitchen that runs daily, providing hundreds of meals per day; and an equipment registry where donated items can be given to flood victims to clean and repair their homes.

This also included round-the-clock helicopter drops to cut-off and isolated communities within a two- to three-hour radius of Lismore, supported by privately donated choppers and aircraft; round-the-clock vehicle and supply drops to families and individuals who could not access our site; emergency accommodation for flood victims in our Indigenous communities; and supporting the capacity for us to help navigate this impact for our Indigenous housing providers. This hub has been a well-coordinated, community-run centre that reflects the foundations of the *Koori Mail*, which is an independent media organisation in our community, by the community and for the community, and certainly for the future of our community.

Although we acknowledge the support given to our communities during this time, we are extremely concerned—just like everybody else—about the future of our communities. This is not just about mitigating flood risk in our region. This is about confidence in all levels of leadership that people come first, that humanity comes first and that those who are in positions of power, and those who are key decision-makers directly within our region and above, take it upon themselves to act quickly and maximise their profiles and their positions of leadership to support this region. We must start giving our communities the respect to autonomously contribute to the conversation, to autonomously contribute to the decision-making and to self-determine what it looks like to provide rescue, relief and recovery for our region.

This means a willingness to listen deeply, listen with the intent to take action, act practically in the reality, and consider that a holistic approach has to be part of the framework. This has been the experience of the *Koori Mail* and it has made an invaluable difference to the people in the Lismore and surrounding communities. As such, we now look forward to supporting the Lismore region with the establishment of a First Nations first-responders project that can provide greater support in this LGA and beyond to our Bundjalung people in the most culturally appropriate and safe way in times of crisis.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Councillor Bird, would you like to make a statement?

ELLY BIRD: Yes. Thanks for the opportunity to address you today. I speak as the coordinator of Resilient Lismore. A brief insight into our history: Resilient Lismore started as Lismore Helping Hands in the 2017 flood response. We coordinated the community response out of the Lismore train station in what was basically a very, very small practice run for this event. We upscaled as soon as this event unfolded. With full acknowledgement of the incredible work that *Koori Mail* did on the ground, we prepared for surge capacity because we knew that the scale of what we were looking at was just going to be impossible for us to manage. So we scaled up surge capacity around spontaneous volunteers, and we have since managed, with a 100 per cent volunteer-run organisation, more than 2,000 jobs and more than 5,000 volunteer deployments. We've had a full-time equivalent of at least 15 people on the go all the time—100 per cent volunteer run. We have a database of around 2,700 spontaneous volunteers.

I think I'm in a unique position to speak to the failings of the New South Wales Government around preparedness for this event, particularly around leveraging community experience and response in recovery. After

the 2017 event, funding was awarded to a local organisation to prepare a spontaneous volunteer management plan. That never went anywhere. When this event happened, they were not able to respond for spontaneous volunteering, due to not having funding to deliver anything. So again we're in a situation where community organisations like ours are forced into a role of coordinating that surge of spontaneous volunteers. There needs to be planning around it because, otherwise, our community is significantly traumatised by people coming in and throwing their belongings on the gutter—well intentioned but often badly managed.

Council was funded for a two-year recovery officer after that event. Then that funding completely dried up, leaving any planning that council had underway to wither on the vine. There was an intention under the Office of Emergency Management for the Lismore council to be a pilot council for recovery planning because we realised that there was no recovery planning for councils or communities. I think that that fell over in the transition between Office of Emergency Management and Resilience NSW. I think that important funding and project was lost in translation.

In this current event, one of my biggest complaints is around not having a point person for Resilience NSW and not having an opportunity to work closely alongside them in delivering our response to community. It's something I've asked for from the very get-go. I was promised a direct link into Beacon so that we could work alongside each other, Beacon being the SES task management system. That never eventuated. I've asked repeatedly for point people at Resilience NSW. It's never eventuated. There's a revolving door of staff, as has already been outlined.

The other thing just to mention briefly is public information. We run a Facebook group that has 30,000-plus members in it. It had 7,500 prior to this event and exploded to 30,000. It's the primary space for the community to talk about recovery. It is ineffectively used by government agencies or organisations to communicate to our community. Not everyone is on Facebook or on social media. But many, many, many people are. It falls to the community to amplify the important recovery communications that are being put out.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Naomi, with *Koori Mail* and the incredible work and effort, what funding assistance have you received from the New South Wales Government directly?

NAOMI MORAN: Zero.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Nothing at all.

NAOMI MORAN: Nothing at all. Our volunteers, similarly. We've had hundreds and hundreds of volunteers over the 13 weeks. We have key volunteers that have been on ground since day dot for 13 weeks. We probably have about 10 of those that are key volunteers, helping coordinate everything. We receive zero funding for our volunteers, zero funding to operate the hub. It's all on the back of the *Koori Mail*—primarily, there's two staff from the *Koori Mail* that support the hub; that's myself and another staff member—and the community.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Have you had a number of visitors from the New South Wales Government to—

NAOMI MORAN: We've had plenty. Obviously, we've gained a lot of media attention to this, given that we're an Indigenous media organisation. So we've had immense support, which, I think, has gone a long way to spread the word about what's happening, not just in our Indigenous communities but, certainly, the Lismore community. We've always communicated that, that this hub is for everybody. It just so happens that it's run by an Indigenous organisation.

I'm the chairperson of the First Nations Media Australia, a peak body for Indigenous media. So we've been utilising our contacts to make sure that our stories are being heard but also the stories of Lismore and the surrounding regions are being heard. We've certainly maximised on our connections that way to make sure that we are getting support. Naturally, that then filters to politicians and to other people who are in leadership positions that want to be a part of it because they want to be seen to be a part of it. There are always two type of people in this world: Either you want to be a part of it because you genuinely want to make a contribution and help, or you want people to see that you are and then walk away and do nothing. We've had more of the latter.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: I apologise. It was the first time I've heard of the First Nations responder project. Is that something that *Koori Mail* intends to auspice? Is that something that you think should receive direct New South Wales Government funded independently to *Koori Mail* to be able to develop and do that?

NAOMI MORAN: Yes, absolutely. It was just a seed that was planted along the way. After probably the first four to six weeks, we looked around and we realised that the majority of people that were doing the work with what we were doing at the hub and getting on the boats out to our Indigenous communities were our own people. We had the contacts. When we posted on our Facebook pages, "Coraki, you're going to receive a drop of food and supplies. Your point of contact is such and such", those people knew who they were. They were a trusted

source to receive those supplies and that information because we knew who they were. So we certainly made sure that we maximised on our connections within community. Then ultimately we just all had a conversation. We said, "We're doing exactly what every other emergency service and agency is doing. It's just being driven by our own people."

I'm a very visual thinker. I like to think big. Thinking big means there is no reason why our regions, particularly regions and towns and communities where we're at severe risk of natural disasters that are impacting our community, can't specifically have a First Nations first responders' team that takes a load off local council and that takes a load off local government. It's culturally safe and appropriate for our own people and communities to go into our communities and make sure that our people are being cared for. What that means, though, is that we have to skill them and train them and make sure that they're qualified and adequate to do that, just like anybody else. That costs money. That takes time. It's something, certainly, that the *Koori Mail* wants to help drive and support as a trusted Aboriginal organisation for 30 years in this region. We can do it, and we can support it, but we need people to listen and acknowledge that this is something that's really practical to help solve a lot of gaps and issues in times of crisis, that it's culturally appropriate, that it's culturally safe. But we do need support and backing to do that. If we don't get it from the Government, just like what we've been doing for the past 13 weeks, we'll find it elsewhere.

The CHAIR: Councillor Bird, you mentioned in your opening statement references and dealing with Resilience NSW. What happened? What transpired? What were your experiences involving that government agency?

ELLY BIRD: I am a councillor on Lismore City Council. One of the first things I did, because I had lost power and connectivity at my own home, was that I went to council, where I knew that I could use internet. I, by dint of being in that building, sat in on some of the operation committee meetings because I needed information to be able to inform our operations. That was my first insight into Resilience NSW and their participation in that process.

The CHAIR: What did you see?

ELLY BIRD: They had a seat at the table. In my opinion, the person that was in that role was very inexperienced and not up to the task, given the scale of what was happening in Lismore—

The CHAIR: Were they brought in? Were they from Lismore?

ELLY BIRD: I couldn't tell you for sure. I think that she did say that she had a history in Lismore. She was in the role for a little while and said to me very clearly, "I'm in this role for the long term. I will be the Lismore Resilience NSW person." I said, "Great. I've got someone that we can have a relationship with." She then quickly went on standdown for three days. I said, "Well, who's my point person now?" I was—

The CHAIR: What do you mean, "standdown"?

ELLY BIRD: Official emergency services get stood down for a period of two or three days. My response is the community doesn't stand down. We are full-time. There's no efficient or effective handover between the—

The CHAIR: When she was stood down, who did you deal with?

ELLY BIRD: I asked who my point person was. I was given a generic email address for Resilience NSW. Every email I sent to that email address went unanswered. I was attempting to activate and stand up critical infrastructure for our community in the Quad precinct, which was set up as a recovery centre—

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Elly, what day was this after 28 February?

ELLY BIRD: I'd have to take that on notice, the actual day. I think it was about a week after and—

The CHAIR: When this person returned, what happened then?

ELLY BIRD: I guess I'd like to just share two examples. One was—they set up a recovery hub in the Quad precinct and contacted me and said, "We're setting up this hub. We'd like you to be a part of it." I said, "Great. No worries. We're keen" because we wanted to get on the ground. We went down there. There was not enough shelter—

The CHAIR: Can I stop you there?

ELLY BIRD: Yes.

The CHAIR: You entered this relationship in good faith?

ELLY BIRD: Absolutely, because we had our history in 2017. I had a relationship with the SES. I wanted to walk in partnership with government because I think it is critically important that community and government work alongside each other in the recovery. We arrived in that precinct and I think the police had dropped a whole lot of food with insufficient shelter over the top of it. Disaster-impacted people were standing around in the full sun. I had to fix it, so I fixed it. I brought in tent infrastructure because I couldn't get an answer from anyone in Resilience NSW about how I would solve that problem and my community needed shelter. So I just did it.

It took around about five weeks to get an answer about whether the Government would cover that. That was after repeated emails to this faceless email address. The other one was that I had an offer from the surf lifesaving club to send a thousand volunteers into Lismore to work alongside us to support our community. All they needed was an email from Resilience NSW saying that they approved it and that those people could work alongside us to support our community. Again, it took me weeks and weeks to try to get an answer to that and to try to get action, but it never happened.

The CHAIR: Where is Resilience NSW now in Lismore?

ELLY BIRD: Working out of the recovery centres.

The CHAIR: Do you have anything to do with them now?

ELLY BIRD: Yes. I sit on a couple of committees alongside the local recovery person in Lismore. She is doing a fantastic job. She is very under-resourced, though. Other than her, there is a revolving door of people. I still don't know who my go-to people are in Resilience NSW and, frankly, I have kind of given up trying to reach out and connect with them to get questions answered.

The CHAIR: In previous evidence we heard that there was duplication, dual lines. Was that the same experience you had from Resilience NSW?

ELLY BIRD: I would not have clear insight into that, but the issue that I had is the rotation of staff. They have a very swift rotation of staff. I think it is around two weeks. So that person comes in, has to get the lay of the land, has to understand what's happening—

The CHAIR: Brought into Lismore?

ELLY BIRD: Yes, brought into Lismore. They have to understand what is happening, they finally catch up—there is never an invitation or a connection to me, to us or to anyone—and then they leave.

The CHAIR: Councillor, I am going to ask you a direct question. If you had a problem, would you go to them?

ELLY BIRD: No.

The CHAIR: What would you do?

ELLY BIRD: I would solve it using my own networks.

The CHAIR: Do you think other members of the community have reached that conclusion involving Resilience NSW? Ms Moran, have you reached that same conclusion?

NAOMI MORAN: Yes, 100 per cent. I strongly believe that everything we have achieved over the past 13 weeks to support this community and the surrounding communities has 100 per cent been driven by the community up.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: But the problem is Resilience NSW controls the resources.

The CHAIR: I was going to say, what have been your dealings with Resilience NSW?

NAOMI MORAN: They, to be honest, put a bit of money towards a tent and portaloos that took weeks to get down to our hub space.

The CHAIR: I am sorry to cut you off, Ms Bird. I will come back to you. What do you mean portaloos? Did you ask Resilience NSW for portaloos? How long did it take for you to get portaloos?

NAOMI MORAN: Our engagement with Resilience NSW has been extremely little. Primarily it has been coordinated with New South Wales police, who have been amazing. They have been on the ground in our hub acting as the middlemen, to be honest. Their representation on the ground has been amazing and I cannot thank them enough. That has been our source of communicating what we need on the ground. Like I said, portaloos coming here and there and a tent that stayed for a bit but was damaged in the second flood. Prior to that we were using the broken toilets that were destroyed in our building because of the flood.

The CHAIR: Ms Bird, I cut you off. Was there something you wanted to say?

ELLY BIRD: Just very quickly, that tent infrastructure is the same tent infrastructure that I organised. So it wasn't Resilience NSW. They came to the party, finally, to pay for it, but it was community organised. So in terms of what they actually sorted out, I think it was quite minimal.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: I have one question. What recommendations do you have for this Committee to make to the New South Wales Government to support the community response and to be able to support the community-led first response?

ELLY BIRD: When Resilience NSW was set up, I was very hopeful that they would have a place-based, community-led model and that the people who were employed for Resilience NSW would be situated within the community and then willing, ready and able to stand up alongside the community to coordinate the recovery. That has not been the experience, and I think that is a great loss because best recovery is community-led recovery and is based on trust and relationships within the community. If those people are not situated here, we don't know them, they don't know anything about us, they don't know how to work alongside us and they don't know how to solve problems, but we do.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: I just wanted to check, and this goes to this issue of the use of the Office of Emergency Management. My understanding was that people were located within community, they had some experience—DCJ staff, for example, used to regularly run a lot of that. You touched on this before, that Resilience NSW was lost along the way. We have been told that about 100 staff were moved over and then most of them were made redundant and then everyone was made a manager. Have you been able to identify any of the people who were around who had the experience? Are they still there?

ELLY BIRD: No. They have only just identified this in the last couple of weeks. But I was wondering why our experience had been lost in translation. It became clear to me that some of the key staff who had carriage of the community development and engagement model around recovery had been moved sideways out of Resilience NSW and were no longer in the agency. Therefore they lost those many years of hard-won understanding of community-led recovery and how to work in partnership with communities.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: I have a question of both of you. You are still in crisis, given the number of people who are still not housed, and we have heard a lot about that. What are your organisations doing in terms of the next three months, the next six months or the next 12 months, really the next three years? That is a big question. The other one is, what would help you the most? Is it really knowing that you could pay a coordinator for the next three years who can gather all of those things, given that you have zero support now? I know that is quite a broad question, but could you take us through that?

NAOMI MORAN: I think one of the realities is—is it fair for us to expect that for another 13 weeks we are reliant on volunteers day in, day out?

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: They must be exhausted.

NAOMI MORAN: The *Koori Mail* has offered some funding, which we have not accepted yet because the requirements to execute that funding do not align with time frames that are feasible for us.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Can you be a little bit more specific about what you are being asked to do—how much money and in what time frame?

The CHAIR: I am sorry, but you are a newspaper, you are a communications company. Why are you providing that? This is extraordinary.

NAOMI MORAN: NIAA, the Indigenous agency, has come forward and offered us some funding to support our volunteers on the ground. Unfortunately that is only for six positions, which will get us by for the next month or so. But the expectation that that funding agreement is in line with the date from 2 May until 31 December really does not align with how we are all feeling in terms of hub relief and support and what realistically we can provide the community with. Again, that comes down to listening to the community and what their needs are and whether there is an opportunity to carry out that agreement. If not, we will go back and see if we can vary it. But if that can't be varied, then naturally we can't accept that funding because it is not feasible for us. The reality is that when it comes to funding, how tied that funding is and the requirements of the funding is really problematic. It is not purposeful in the moment and we need something that is purposeful in the moment.

What we have done is again we have taken it upon ourselves to build those relationships with our volunteers. They are mob volunteers, so naturally they feel it is their cultural responsibility as well to keep doing this. That is how this is run basically—cultural responsibility. In terms of how we are supporting the Indigenous communities to recover, the *Koori Mail* has raised $1.3 million of donor money to support our Indigenous families,

businesses and communities through this disaster. We have disbursed $425,000 of that funding already to our Indigenous businesses and organisations to either recover or to keep doing the work for us. That means they then provide programs and services to support our Indigenous communities around emotional and mental wellbeing during this tragedy. We have had to think really strategically about what we can do—even though we were flood affected and we lost our offices and we are trying to rebuild and continue to operate—to share this funding now through a tiered system so that these organisations can take some of that responsibility off us. We're basically doing a job that government agencies should be here on the ground doing. This is not our day job. We are the *Koori Mail*; we're a newspaper, we're a media organisation. But, you know, I think it just so happens that we are very good at communicating. We are very good at maximising on our networks and are very good at making those connections on the ground—connections with other hubs that have done it before us. You know, we are very good at listening.

The Hon. MARK BANASIAK: Ms Moran, could you, perhaps on notice, provide a bit more detail about the First Nations responder project, just so the Committee can actually take that information and maybe put it forward as a potential recommendation?

NAOMI MORAN: First of all, that's just a name that we plucked out of thin air because it makes sense.

The Hon. MARK BANASIAK: It's a great name.

NAOMI MORAN: Give me an opportunity to create an idea and a way forward, then I will, absolutely. But the reality is that during these times you have to look around at what's being done in the most proactive, positive way to help people rebuild and recover, and try and push those ideas through to the top. And, like I said, if it doesn't get pushed to the top, or if it does and nobody is listening, we will then take it upon ourselves to continue trying to deliver something that we feel is absolutely going to be practical to this region.

The Hon. MARK BANASIAK: I think you have already touched on this a bit, but, to both of you, would it be unfair to say that the only group that isn't doing the job of Resilience NSW is Resilience NSW?

ELLY BIRD: They are doing work in some spaces. I would acknowledge the work of some people on the ground, and there is an ongoing role for them in the next couple of years. But my firm belief, based off my experiences in 2017 and currently, is that I think that all of the work should be grounded in community—led by community—and that the role of government is to resource and support community organisations that are doing that work. Just back to the previous question, because it links, our strategic planning now is with a two- to five-year event horizon. Because I will not repeat our mistakes of 2017, which is not continuing to lead this work. Communities must lead this work. If we leave it to governments, or if we leave it—with my council hat firmly off at this point—to local government, it will not have the same weight or commitment that it will if communities are front and centre of that planning and strategic work.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Councillor Bird, you touched earlier on a spontaneous volunteers program. Money was provided for it, and it didn't go anywhere. What did you mean by that?

ELLY BIRD: Spontaneous volunteers, for those that aren't familiar with the lingo, are volunteers that swarm into a disaster-impacted community, full of goodwill and intention to support the community. It's one of the big gaps in disaster response, that people aren't really ready for that surge. In my time, since 2017, I've had a lot of conversations with people about spontaneous volunteers and the challenges around managing them. I think, off the back of the work that we did in 2017, a funding proposal was put forward. And we were an impacted community organisation and we, to be honest, weren't ready or able to step fully up into that space of capitalising on the work that we had done. So that funding was given to the Northern Rivers Community Gateway.

But, again, I think it's really important to understand that recovery funding is often provided for two years, and then it just stops. But this work—and so much money is poured into recovery; it needs to be poured into preparedness. And we need to be funding planning, preparedness, community-led plans from the get-go. I think one of the issues we have seen is that funding dropped away, similarly to the pilot program that council was running around recovery.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: So the money went in there and then—you said it didn't go anywhere. Did they end up doing anything with it, or—

ELLY BIRD: A plan or a strategy was developed, but it didn't materialise into "This is what we will do when an event happens; these are the players; this is how we will work together." Some analysis of the way that spontaneous volunteering should be managed was done; it didn't translate into anything of substance in this event.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: I have a question for you, Ms Moran. Your organisation could be a very different organisation in 12 months' or 18 months' time. Are we thinking about that yet? This could change

what the *Koori Mail* is set up to do. Are we wanting to go down that path, or are you wanting to get back into the *Koori Mail*?

NAOMI MORAN: I think there is opportunity for the *Koori Mail* to guide and support either a branch of what we do, or something completely separate to what we do. What we'd like to see, and I think what a lot of people in our communities would like to see now, given their experiences with us over the past 13 weeks, is that the *Koori Mail* is a trusted source of, I guess, making things happen. And while, yes, we are a newspaper and are back operational as a newspaper, there's nothing to say that the *Koori Mail* as an Aboriginal business—as a 100 per cent Aboriginal-owned and independent business—can now, with or without funding and support from other agencies, move forward to support our community, I guess, to contribute to what it looks like now in the event that this happens again.

We are not free from these disasters. This region is certainly not free from these disasters. This is bound to happen again. Whatever time frame that presents us, as an organisation we are now exploring the possibilities of what it looks like to, in the very instance, train up our community people that have been by our side for the past 13 weeks to get the skills needed so that if it does happen again, they are ready—just like the SES, just like any other emergency services—to go into rescue and recovery and relief on behalf of our communities.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Earlier, Janelle Saffin suggested that it would have been better, initially, if we'd looked at registering victims. That would have simplified the grants process, made it easier for other volunteers to know that they were actually—and reduced the fraud opportunity. I just wondered if you do have any thoughts on that.

ELLY BIRD: Yes. I think, only about a week ago or something, it was announced that there would be outreach happen into the community, which was welcomed. But I was advocating for outreach from week one. That outreach should have happened into our community while people were at their homes cleaning up. That is when government agencies should have been out on the ground collecting people's contacts and details, and, yes, earlier even, at the evacuation centres—I think there were some failings around data management and collection at evacuation centres—but also in recovery, because we know that not everybody went to evacuation centres. Still people are camped up on top of each other in the hills and wherever their family and friends are. So there should have been outreach—

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Sorry, can I just acknowledge that it was not compulsory to register at those centres.

ELLY BIRD: I wouldn't give you a clear answer on that.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt you.

ELLY BIRD: No, that's okay.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: But a lot of information was not collected.

ELLY BIRD: Yes, absolutely—much, much better opportunities for data.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Would it still be community-led recovery if, say, the role of Resilience NSW was to rock up on day one and say, "*Koori Mail*, Resilient Lismore, you're right here doing it. What do you need? Here it is."

ELLY BIRD: Yes.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: And would that have been a more joyous experience by all?

NAOMI MORAN: In part, I guess. The difference between *Koori Mail* initially leading support around rescue, relief and recovery was that we did make our Indigenous communities a priority. So I would question whether they had the capacity to navigate the engagement in our Indigenous communities at that point, and whether they would ultimately say to us that we were okay to lead that ourselves, or whether we would say that we were going to lead that ourselves.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Because they wouldn't recognise it?

NAOMI MORAN: Because the relationships would be non-existent. And that was very evident in those probably first four days, where we had to get out to our Indigenous communities that were cut off within a two- to three-hour radius, because they had no access to any food or supplies, either by roads or—sorry, either getting to them by boats, or cars that were equipped to take the roads that had been damaged by the floodwaters, after they had receded.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Okay. Thank you.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: This is probably a two-pronged question. Firstly, what type of support are both your organisations still providing to the community, to individuals, to families? And can you give the Committee a sense the scale of the mental health impacts and the mental health support services that should be provided to this community in the coming months, if not right now?

ELLY BIRD: We have moved into—we have had a short-term phrase that we say: "safe, secure and warm for winter". We're focused very much, given the acute housing crisis, on getting as many of those homes habitable as possible because there's—

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Which is tomorrow.

ELLY BIRD: —nowhere else for them to go. We are focused on that. We are coordinating skilled volunteers still. We have a jobs list of around 400 jobs in our system currently. The scale of peer-to-peer connectivity in our Facebook group—we are not really tracking that because we just don't have the capacity. But that is current and ongoing and we will continue to work in that space. We are also doing a bit of grant support. We have a tool library that people can borrow resources from. Essentially, we do a lot of informal community trauma support of people just walking through the door. We are collaborating with *Koori Mail* around wellbeing support, but that is something that desperately needs resourcing. There is mental health support in some of the government programs but we know that people aren't accessing them yet because they're not at that stage of their recovery. All that money is sitting there and those programs are sitting there but I don't think people are really tapping into it yet.

NAOMI MORAN: Similar, so ongoing food and supply bank, clothing, bedding, furniture supplies, mattresses and medical centres. We have volunteer GPs, registered nurses and nurse practitioners. Chronic disease nurses obviously were a priority for us because of our Indigenous Elders and community members that suffer from kidney problems and diabetic problems. We've had them on site. We have wellbeing support on site, so we still have counsellors and psychs on site that are actually doing onsite updates or outreach and will continue to do that. Obviously, the kitchen is still on site. The equipment registry, unfortunately we had about $15,000 of our equipment stolen from an offsite storage facility, which is a shame, but we're still able to provide some kind of equipment for those that are still in need—and they are absolutely still in need. As of today we have had people come down and access equipment. If people think that the cleaning process and the recovery process at their homes is over, it certainly isn't.

Again, for us, what we've been able to do is generate an enormous amount of money through the $1.3 million which we were able to drip-feed down to our Indigenous communities, not just here in Lismore but throughout this Bundjalung region, to make sure that they're providing ongoing support that we don't have the capacity to do. That's through our preschools, our medical centres, our community organisations, our land councils, our cooperatives and our societies to make sure that they're able to provide intimate support to the people in their communities in that region that have been flood affected. It's a really practical way to offload some of that responsibility that we just don't have the capacity to do at this stage.

But also, one of the biggest things that we've—again, talking about cultural responsibility—is making sure that we're supporting organisations like the Jali Local Aboriginal Land Council to support the community of Cabbage Tree Island. That's obviously been a priority for us. Prior to the announcement of funding to rebuild that community we had already dedicated $200,000 of our own community donations that had been funded to that GoFundMe to support initial infrastructure down at the Wardell site, which will become interim homes and a community for that community until they've been rebuilt. Like I said, it is certainly not our day job, but we've been really strategic on how to best support our communities through this and obviously, on top of that, making sure that we do take on that responsibility to support other hubs and engage with other hubs in the process, and support local Lismore residents and the towns and communities surrounding.

The CHAIR: We have one last question. I will go to the Hon. Rod Roberts.

The Hon. ROD ROBERTS: Thank you, ladies. I don't expect a commitment from you now, and this is just in a thought bubble type of process at the moment, but I would like a comment on it. It is quite apparent from everything we've heard—and, in fact, our own knowledge as individuals—that community is best placed to engage with their own community and lead the recovery effort. Government is best placed to provide the money for that. As I say, I don't want the commitment now but this is a concept. Going forward, would your organisations—because they are two separate ones—be prepared to enter into some sort of agreement arrangement with Resilience NSW for the future where terms of engagement are drawn up, for example, and the moment there's an incident or another flood—and touch wood we don't, but the likelihood is it's going to happen—you can get funding immediately because there's this prearranged agreement between Resilience NSW and yourself?

Obviously, Resilience NSW has to be careful in how it hands out taxpayers' money, and I'm not suggesting that your organisations would be doing anything improper, but they could give you a finite amount to start with, which you could immediately tap into because your bank accounts are registered with them and there are points of contact et cetera. You could swing into operation immediately and then, ongoing, Resilience NSW could top up that account and spot audit it, perhaps, in how you've handled that money. How's that for a concept, do you think?

ELLY BIRD: I think it's okay, but I think the thing that we need to remember about disasters is that there are always emergent groups that step into leadership spaces. As much as Resilient Lismore may be here five, three years down the track—whenever we have the next event—I think that government needs to prepare for emergent groups. In this instance, *Koori Mail* stepping up in the really strong way that they did was an example of an emergent group stepping into the leadership space. In terms of thinking more broadly about disasters and impacted communities in general, I think there needs to be some type of model around supporting emergent groups.

NAOMI MORAN: Can I just state the obvious? It just blows my mind that this hasn't happened already.

The Hon. ROD ROBERTS: Exactly.

NAOMI MORAN: I'm sorry, but we are in a flood-prone region. We have always been in a flood-prone region. I'm not going to sit here and pretend—like I said, this is not my day job and I haven't been across all the conversations in the history of flooding. But I am local to this area—I am not originally from this area but I'm a local from this area—and I've seen a few floods. My family has seen a few floods. It just blows my mind that this hasn't happened already. Also, in terms of considering the concept around what this support looks like, as an Aboriginal organisation that has been independent for 30 years and is a strong, independent Indigenous business, you would actually then be asking us to consider working in close partnership and relationship with a structure and a framework that has never served Indigenous people in this country. For us to consider that it would be a—I hear what you're saying and I do think that it is possible, but is it something that we can have full confidence in, in terms of our experience as an Indigenous organisation leading flood relief and recovery during this time? It may be that I'll get back to you on that one.

The CHAIR: Thank you, everyone. That ends our session. Thank you for your time.

(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. What we are doing this evening is a public forum. It is a relatively new innovation to the New South Wales Parliament, so bear with us. We have 15 registered speakers at this stage. Before we commence, I make some brief comments about procedures for today's public forum. Speakers are asked to register, which they have done. Speakers will be given approximately five minutes to speak to the Committee. You will hear a warning indication at 3½ minutes and we ask that you conclude your comments at about five minutes. What you say will be transcribed and streamed live on the Parliament's website, and it will be included as evidence to the inquiry.

I stress it is important that we try to keep to time as much as possible to ensure that we give everyone who has registered an opportunity to speak and share their story with us. It is also important to note that all participants are covered by parliamentary privilege. Committee hearings and public forums are not intended to be a forum for people to make adverse reflections on others under the protection of parliamentary privilege. It is important that participants focus on issues raised by the inquiry's terms of reference and avoid naming individuals unnecessarily. Finally, I sincerely thank those who have come forward today to share their story. It is important that the Committee hears the personal stories of those affected by the floods. It will help to shape our report and formulate what we hope are important recommendations to the Government. Welcome. Our first participant is Mr Steve Rogers.

Mr STEVE ROGERS, before the Committee: Thank you, and thanks for the opportunity of speaking here. I am Steve Rogers. I'm the manager of Natural Rice Co. I am also speaking on behalf of our rice growers and probably growers a bit more broadly in the Northern Rivers here. We've only got five minutes. I'm going to try and cram as much as I can into it. I'm going to start by giving you an idea of who we are, what we do and, probably more importantly, how a company like ours is going to help the local farmers in the recovery process. Quickly, Natural Rice Co is an Australian family-owned business. We are located in Kyogle. We contract local growers to grow and supply dryland rice, which we process locally and distribute into major supermarkets in Australia. We have been building a base of growers and investing in the area since 2015.

We are one of two rice-growing areas in New South Wales and one of two commercial rice suppliers in supermarkets in Australia. One area—the main area—is the Riverina, which is SunRice, and the other area is here in the Northern Rivers, which is Natural Rice Co. Our point of difference to SunRice and the other rice-growing areas is that we produce dryland rice here. Dryland rice is rice grown without any irrigation or the need to be grown in a traditional paddy system where it is submerged in water. I'm just trying to build for you what we are and how we support here. The Northern Rivers is the most unique rice-growing area in New South Wales, if not Australia, and that is due to the ability to grow our rice dryland, without the need for any irrigation water. Our climate, namely, warm night-time temperatures, and our rainfall allow us to do this. So we are a pretty special place for what we're doing here.

We currently contract 30 to 40 local growers. I've got one of them sitting over here just now. We grow our rice in areas that are at high risk of loss for any other rice crop—so low areas that are inundated by floodwater, predominantly. A high percentage of our rice is produced in the floodplains of Woodburn, Coraki and Broadwater, where the rice does thrive in our typical floods. Saying that, rice completely submerged under water for seven days, which happened during the major flood, doesn't survive. We lost 55 per cent of our rice in the main flood and a further 10 per cent of our rice in the continued wet weather that we've experienced since. So that's a little bit over $2 million of revenue that would have been generated from the rice crops that will no longer flow through the local economy. Unfortunately, a lot of our growers did not just lose crops. They lost the lot, and this is one of the saddest things I've ever experienced.

This brings me to how does the Natural Rice Co come into play with the recovery of the crippled agriculture sector. We can offer an opportunity to growers who want to plant the next summer crop that has less risk. Growers need a quick income. They can't be waiting two years for sugarcane et cetera. I'm not downgrading sugarcane or something like that, but we have an opportunity to give growers a quick income. The Government needs to support people like us who can give those opportunities to these growers. Now, the Government did have a chance recently to support us and it wouldn't have cost the Government a cent. That was purely to grant us the export licence in this recent rice vesting review. For those who don't know, rice in New South Wales is regulated and SunRice owns the single exclusive export licence. That leaves us in a place where we are dictated on where, how much and when we can sell our rice. So the opportunity that was going to come to us was the ability to sell our rice into higher markets. Higher markets equals higher returns to growers equals higher money going back into the economy. It just makes sense.

Unfortunately, the Government decided to keep us in this same old monopoly that we're in now, where we are restricted on where we can sell our rice. I'll just summarise it all up. There was an opportunity for

government. It wouldn't have cost a cent. Not a cent. Now, to support our growers, we ask the Government to support agriculture sectors like ourselves that can give growers the opportunity to get income quickly by looking at things like grants et cetera—the modern manufacturing grants that a lot of businesses have applied for around here. I ask you to show some support in generating our opportunities to give to the growers.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Rogers. Now we have Hanabeth Luke, and after Hanabeth Luke we'll have Mrs Kylie O'Reilly.

Dr HANABETH LUKE, before the Committee: Good evening. My name is Dr Hanabeth Luke. I teach how we build resilience in a changing climate at Southern Cross University. I am also in Marine Rescue. On the morning of the flood, I was in a tinnie rescuing people from Woodburn, and I spent the following weeks helping with the recovery efforts in Evans Head and supporting the surrounding areas. There are four areas that I want to speak about as to how we can improve our response and our preparation and recovery in future.

The first is through technology—climate [inaudible] infrastructure, and I'm not just talking about better roads that don't wash away. Better communication systems that will withstand fire and flood are key, but also real-time data capture, so when the rain falls, we have real-time rain gauges feeding back into a modelling system that can give people that crucial information of when the flood peak is going to come and how high it is going to come. But also if we have a smart 3D model by using a 3D contour map, we can help people to prepare. Also, we can help the emergency services to respond to know where people are, and this would have been really helpful for us when we had been through Woodburn and we wanted to know where to go next to help people. So helping with rescues for emergency services and for community rescuers. Also, it could help with the claims process. I know people who filled in five, six, 10 or more forms and still haven't had a cent to help. Once the waters have receded, you send the surveyors out, you verify how high the waters went and where, and then you can say, "Right, we don't need to know your postcode, but where were you on the map?" Pinpoint it. "Okay, these are the things that you are eligible for. Here is more information."

The second area is people, so rejuvenate our emergency services. I'm talking about funding here. I'm talking about more paid roles and emergency services that are well resourced to be locally run and well connected, and also to support that essential community response that we learn can be so important at times like this. Moreover, we need to support the community recovery hubs. They have played and still play such an important role in our community since the floods and are struggling with being shut down and unsupported. So those are really key. The third is housing. People are in a desperate situation. In the short term, people who are doing better have got mobile homes. Those who aren't doing so well are in dome tents in the mud. This is a desperate situation that needs urgent help. For the longer term recovery, people have different needs. Some people aren't getting any support from their insurance, others want to rebuild, some want to raise their houses. A lot of people are being told we need to wait until the outcome of the CSIRO study. That's too long. People need more certainty and they need it now. I think what needs to happen is that there must be a very strong community-engaged approach to making the decisions about how we move forward, which can empower people about the different pathways that they may take.

I guess the fourth one is mental health. Wolfgang will talk more about this later, but the mental health of our people across this region is terrible. People are in a state that they need so much help, in terms of that. Certainty and a pathway forward in terms of whether they move, whether they rebuild or whether they re-raise their houses will go a very long way to taking people out of what is for many a catatonic state of depression. Finally, I finish with the important point that how we recover from this is a statement of how we as Australians can work together, how we can listen to each other and how we can get the best outcome for the future of this area and for other areas that may experience other extreme events in this time of climate disruption.

Ms KYLIE O'REILLY, before the Committee: Good evening. Thank you for having me and listening to my story. Basically, my husband and I own a commercial mushroom farm in between Woodburn and Evans Head. We live on a road that was never meant to flood. We bought our farm 15 months ago. In the flood, we lost our farm completely. It was demolished. We had 15 sheds; we now have three left. We lost our home. We had 1.7 metres of water go through our home and just under three metres of water go through our farm. We lost everything bar a backpack with laptops, a pair of tracksuits, five pairs of work socks and two pairs of underpants. That is what we got out, plus our dog.

In the aftermath, we were lucky enough that we were taken in by one of our local staff member's parents. We spent five days waiting for the water to go down. Our first day back in was by boat. We saw what we were faced with and realised we were in trouble. Like a lot of people, we did not have insurance on the farm or the home. Luckily, we did on our vehicles—so that's another story. On the clean-up, we spent 21 days—143 truckloads—with family and friends to clean up our farm. We had the ADF come in and tell us it was too dangerous for them to do it. We had composts, as you can imagine. It's a commercial mushroom farm—800

four-kilo boxes of mushroom going rotten, leaking into the river. We screamed for help. We tried everyone—our local council, everyone—and we got no help. So if it wasn't for our friends and family, we don't know how we would have got through it. That's one story.

Then we go to the grants. We have currently applied for $200,000 small business grant. We are not valid for that because we don't employ 21 staff; we only employ 12 local staff. We have applied for the $75,000 special disaster grant. Our application is still being assessed. We applied for that three days after the flood. We applied for the $10,000 small business grant. We're not valid for that because if you apply for that, you can't go for the $75,000. We applied for the $50,000 small business grant. We're not able to get that because we are a primary producer. Lastly, we applied for the $25,000 rural landholders grant—not valid for that because our land size is not 10 hectares. On a win, we applied for the $20,000 Back Home grant and we got it. We paid $27,000 to live in a caravan outside our house. That's not really going to help us.

What I want to see from the Government is don't make it so hard for us to get funding. As I said, we employ 12 local staff. They are out of work. Out of the 12 of them, three of us have now got jobs. I have had to go back to full-time work so my husband and I have an income. We are living in a caravan on our block, looking at a farm that has been absolutely destroyed, wondering how we are ever going to get back on track. We supply 63 businesses from Yamba up to Tweed Heads. I don't know if you guys eat mushrooms, but have a look at the cost of them now. I know we are only small but it makes a big difference, and we live in a region where we have a lot of vegetarians and vegans. We have been lucky enough that we have had our bank come to support us, but we do not have the means to go back to the bank and make our mortgage even larger.

We, unlike other people, are a little bit lucky because, yes, we have a caravan to live in. Yes, we are 45 years of age and we can continue to hopefully bounce back from this. Yes, we do want to open our mushroom farm again because we loved it. We bought it 15 months ago, knowing that this was going to be what we would do until we were around 65 or 70 years of age and hopefully sell it on to the next generation. But at this point we really don't know that that will happen without some government support, and the paperwork is just enormous. I've had to go and identify myself to Centrelink five times. I've given my birth certificate and I've given my passport. I lost my licence. I was told I couldn't get an emergency licence to get a job because I wasn't going overseas. It's just ridiculous what they have put us through. They dangled a carrot, and then they don't give it to us. There is also another grant that is apparently available and they tell you to apply for it, then when you ask them, "We're sorry. The framework hasn't been done." Don't tell us to apply for things if you're not ready.

Ms CAMILA PETERS-QUAYLE, before the Committee: Hello. I lived in what you would consider the epicentre in South Lismore at 47 Kyogle Street—a beautiful old house once. I bought it two years ago. I was technically legally above flood. I love obeying laws and ordinances, but what I didn't know was there were a few secret squirrelled documents that said I wasn't above flood; I found out after the fact. I also found out after the fact during the flood that it went in two metres into my home. So there is shit, literally—I'm not swearing at you. There is literally effluent or whatever all over my home inside and out. It took months to clean—and I am a clean person.

I had renovated it. I could have got 650. It's now worth less than 200. That's the cost of my mortgage. I'm not eligible for Centrelink. I've been back five times. I've tried to apply for the Back Home grant. I keep getting asked—I think I've given them my mortgage documents, my banking documents, my bought home documents, pretty much everything except my bra size, and I get these 20-year-old kids say to me, "You've got to give us proof that you own the house." I have. I have given them council docs. They can't even tell the difference between a rates and water notice, oh my goodness, or a council notice. I'm not here to whinge or looking for pity. I'm looking for your help and recommendations.

I have a master of business—org psych, org change, behaviour overall with tremendous, beautiful leaders. I've had the privilege to work with prime ministers and make recommendations on Comcare to heal to prevent—I was the first whistleblower on that before the doctors. My first degree was in medicine, so I believe strongly in duty of care, duty to act, do no harm. When I come to you, I come to you with information, and I beg you for help for my community. I am speaking from a particular angle—I get that—right now and you're hearing others, which is beautiful. I beg you for recommendations and outcomes that I'm asking for. Statistically, I ran billions of dollars of procurement as well, resourcing all sorts of things—telcos, banking. I was a global diversity manager for Qantas. I wrote their reconciliation action plan roles and responsibilities. So I get annoyed when I see responsible people not acting to their duty of care or duty to act.

Where is the $3 billion that has been spent? I have not received a thing. Where is the $10 billion that is sitting up the top, with the short arms and nobody is putting their hand in their pockets? Where is the $5 billion down there? Where is the $4 billion that insurance agencies and underwriters made last year in profit alone? I want investigations on that. I want the money going to the people who really need it, like these people in my

community—the disabled parents and children who couldn't be here today; the 75-year-old who has poo in her house, and she's lining her house with cardboard; my friend who is dying of a terminal illness, who has just put IKEA things together, and he lost Salvador Dali paintings in his house; people in my street; painters that couldn't be here because they're trying to get money to pay for things. None of us have been paid. Shame, shame, shame. Sorry, it's not at you but the system is clogging. It's not helping. It's not getting the outcome or results.

Here are some recommendations. I would sincerely love you to support them and deliver them. Number one, do no harm. First, pay people who are above flood their insurance. My insurance agency, Budget Direct, has scammed me. Legally I was above flood. My contract said obey ordinances. They haven't paid. That means they have breached the contract, they've cooked the books, brought in a hydrologist, bodgy dodgy. That's insurance payments. They should be paying, not you, not Government. Pay people who weren't insured $50,000—match Queensland, please, I beg you. Do voluntary removals. Let people get paid to market rates prior to the flood, not after—clearly—and give them the option to relocate their homes and in the shire if they want, or out. I don't want ever be in this council again.

There are reasons for that. Please stop forcing people in my area to pay water rates for us using water to clean the poo off their sewerage and the fact that they were derelict, didn't fix the pumps, were told when the levee was put in it's too small, rejected people from around the world who have tried to help them all of the time. Please don't shoot the messenger—I'm being honest with you. Just remember, please, the time is always right to do what is right. That is what Martin Luther King said. You all have the power to do that. You all have the power to influence the people with the money to deliver it. First and strongest recommendation, they say it will be $400 million to move us. It's going to be a lot more. If you spent $3 billion, I'll save you some money in two, three, five years.

It's going to happen again, no doubt. Okay? Climate change, everything—believe it or not, whatever you want, I don't mind. However, pay $1.5, relocate people. Pay $3, and then save yourself $3, $5, $10 in three years, five years, 10 years. It's the new norm, unfortunately. It's sad. You can save the Government and you can save lives, and I really beg you for help for everybody here. I really thank you for coming here from all areas and offering us this chance to speak. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, ma'am.

MARK COLLINS, before the Committee: First of all, I apologise in advance if I start offending people. My name is Mark Collins and basically on the 28th I was woken up by a telephone call at 1 o'clock in the morning. The local gym needed help in getting equipment out, evacuating their things. At that time, I met the head of the SES. He was parked at Uralba Street in a car. I went up to say hello to him and he started ordering me to run along Diadem Street ordering people to evacuate. I got constantly asked, "Why are you doing this, not the SES?" On and off, I stayed there. When people started showing up with boats I gave them a hand tossing them off the trailers and into the water. At some stages during the day I admit I literally mean throwing them off. Now I broke the record that day—if there ever was one—for throwing boats into the water off trailers.

The SES eventually came but returned, two younger members, and they threatened us all and told us that we should stop rescuing people; that it was illegal. Later, a police officer walked up to me and said, "Listen, what are you doing here?" I explained to him I was taking the information. That's how desperate the situation was. People were going onto Facebook and to Twitter and blogging on, showing how desperate they were, doing their selfies saying goodbye because they were about to drown to death and the SES won't even take my call, neither will 000. They literally were ready to die. There was a bunch of elderly ladies that just happened to have the internet on their mobile phones and they were giving me the addresses and I was begging people as I helped them unload their boats and put them in the water, saying "No, we've got to go rescue their family" and going, "Yeah, well once you've done that" and begging them literally to go look in on these people.

I'm told that the emergency services and police lost count of the number of lives I'd saved. One of them pointed out to me that the 000 was still at 5 o'clock in the morning telling people to climb into their ceiling underneath their roofs and eventually the SES will come for them. We had to patch in a line through, working there on the spot, two civilians, patch in a line, getting a call through to 000 from someone in Sydney, who they knew, to us here in Lismore. And I spoke to them and said, "Listen, this is killing people because the boats are going out there and we've got no idea who's in there. We can't see through roofs." They were ordering us to tell the boats to slow down and check every single roof that is empty. I managed by talking to them convinced them to send the information of every single person, every single 000 call they receive from 11.30 the night before that night to the evacuation headquarters at the university; I begged them, pleaded with them, for this.

Then I got the police calling me up and demanding why was I doing this. A police officer eventually came down and said, "Right, listen, you are the manager of this operation." I'm going, "What do you mean?" And they're going, "You're the manager." They told me I had a really calm head under stressful situations. I debate that

finding. Basically, I was the one who decided to send the boats out to North Lismore. I was arguing and pleading to get more boats to East Lismore early in the morning because the water would rise and the currents would get stronger. That seemed to be totally beyond every single thing that the headquarters seemed to understand of floods. Unfortunately, they sent me the public servants to try and help me, who were trained by the public service in disaster management, and they were just out to get glory for themselves, arguing with me, hindering me, and they were just a total distraction and waste of time.

I fought, and literally I was attacked—physically assaulted, jumped by five men at one stage. Another time I got jumped by five men and threatened with a knife. I had my family threatened, their welfare threatened over the radios. The police had appointed me to be the manager, the State emergency backed that up. As I said, they said I was the only one doing that job. Literally, I got the major drop-off centre moved to Ballina Street, where they could actually get the buses in and out of there and get the vehicles out of there faster. I got the people to give their mobile phone numbers to the police at the evacuation centre at South Lismore, that reduced the response times for emergency calls, and I asked, thanked and pleaded and finally Kevin Hogan, who was running the Nimbin—

The CHAIR: Mr Collins, you have had more than five minutes and we have other people who would like to make a contribution.

MARK COLLINS: Anyways, the tools that I begged them to put in those boats saved lives.

The CHAIR: I understand that. Thank you. Thank you for what you have done.

SUSAN CONROY, before the Committee: Thank you for being here and for listening to the stories that people have to tell. There is obviously just a limit to how much we can cover, all of us in, the experiences that we have had that are now three months old. I am going to jump around a little bit. But, just to start with, I live in a House that is an early twentieth-century house, has no history of being flooded. I'm lucky, therefore, that I had affordable insurance. God help me for the next time round. I don't think I'll be so lucky.

I was one of those people. Some people may have heard Janelle Saffin's story. She was staying with us because she couldn't get home. The three of us eventually resolved at a certain point to leave the house and to swim up the hill to get away from the floodwaters. We had some extraordinary conversations. Janelle being who she is was in touch with both the Government and the Opposition and the SES locally, and so on. At one stage we were told to get onto the table that was in our dining room and by that stage it was up to about my hip height. That was at the stage when furniture started moving around and floating. When I finally got back into the house, a table that we were told to get onto—which is hardwood and eucalypt, and took three men to get into the house—had actually been moved onto a diagonal against another wall, so it was never going to be a good idea to do things like that.

We were all very clear that we weren't going to stay inside the house because it wasn't safe and we were just trying to debate when was going to be the right time. We did try to leave before the mud flood arrived, but it was too late. I'm in an elevated house. I had walked down to the landing with my partner and there was the clear flood stormwater coming down the street at the same time as, suddenly, the mud flood came across from the Browns Street basin. It was too late to leave. We went back into the house, blah blah blah. So there are lots of things to take out of it. I was ringing and trying to maintain connections with my neighbours, making sure I knew where people were. I knew who were the immediate neighbours, who were in their roofs. I didn't know about the people a little bit further up the street.

As we were finally swimming out—and we waited until we had some flotation devices and one of those things was a great big four-wheel drive tyre that floated into the property. My partner swam out and got it and brought that back in for all of us to use to move along. So we used the protection of our houses and then had to push across between our houses to keep going up the street until we got to a point where we had to actually go out into it. There were issues around communication. Like, tonight I know about this because someone who's in Yamba posted this information on Twitter. I'd learnt about the commissioner's inquiry at SCU from the Blue Mountains when somebody sent me a Facebook link. I'm not on Facebook. I said, "I'm not on Facebook. I can't read this. I can't open it." So there are lots of communication issues right back to the night of the flood but continuing for how people participate. It's hard because so many of my neighbours are so caught up with trying to make one day at a time. Being able to participate in this or to actually write their stories is a sheer impossibility.

There are issues in terms of our catchments and the fact that those catchments have been degraded over a very long period of time. There are issues that have been raised by others in terms of the length of time it's going to take to make decisions around when people get their funding or relocation. I now live in a house that, when we get to the 16-metre flood—and Lismore City Council is now recognising that—my house will definitely drown. It got above the windows and the doors, so we were all very glad we were outside on the verandah debating when

to leave. Thinking about the plan to retreat from north and south Lismore, and parts of the CBD, there is no thinking that I'm aware of in terms of the social and cultural infrastructure. It hasn't been renewed in many years and it's missing in action now because of the destruction. Thank you.

Mr BIG ROB, before the Committee: Thank you, Mr Chair. My name's Big Rob. I'm a Lismore City councillor, a Rous County councillor. I'm on the floodplain management committee. I'm here as an individual, though. I'm just going to quickly give you a rundown of my history. I've been interested in the flood issues around Lismore for well over a decade. In 2017 I lost my shop in Keen Street, mainly because I couldn't get a boat or a jet ski or anything to come in. All these keys around my neck are for boarding house rooms that I manage for low socio-economic groups. I couldn't get three people that were stuck in one of the buildings out. So I spent hours trying to get one and I couldn't get it. I have a beautiful photo of about 15 SES and other rescue people watching the meter at the levee waiting for it to overtop because it never happened before then.

I also arranged, since then, three boats, three motors for this exact event because we expected it to happen. I couldn't use them because at the time this event started my ute was off the road and the three motors were in my out-of-flood storage in South Lismore, which is no longer out of flood. So, I couldn't get to them. Also, as a councillor, apparently it was improper to get out there amongst it. One of the big regrets I have of this event was sharing an SES post to tell people not to put their boats in the water. I was asked to do it because I actually have the biggest social media presence on the North Coast. I was asked to put it out there specifically and I did, regrettably. I'm glad Aussies don't listen because if they didn't get out there with their boats, we would've had a lot of casualties and deaths. In the 2022 flood—so I lost my shop in 2017. I lost everything else except for some clothes, computers and a couple of books that I had where I work, where I keep an address as well.

I also caught COVID one week after the evacuation centres opened because I was working up there between 18 and 21 hours a day until they sent me home for a nap. I caught it on the Friday, I think. I didn't know until the Sunday when I got tested. Then the next week I was very sick and for the next three weeks after that I was even sicker—I recovered from COVID—but from coughs. I'm speaking quickly because I got a lot to say. But about the points—point A: There was no-one on the ground prior to the event. It took a while to get there because all the road access and everything was cut off, including the airport. We need to address those. There are no reserves anywhere. There should be a big shed with non-perishable goods and reserves because we need food, clothes and things like that. We know we need this. We are the most flood-affected area in Australia and we don't have anything ready, so it just makes no sense to me. The decision-makers are nowhere to be found until after the event.

I'm going to jump to the evacuation centre quickly because there were issues with that. Food availability within 24 hours was difficult to make happen. I was one of the councillors that was up there into the night. We were being told when DCJ came, three days in, "Shut it down," and we just ignored them. People were coming in at two in the morning and we wanted to give them a hot meal. We wanted to feed them. We wanted to let them have a coffee, someone to talk to. We could direct them to the shower. It was like nine to five only, was the response from DCJ. We couldn't accept that. Drugs and alcohol were a huge problem. Security and lack of policing was a huge problem. There was one security guard, I think, for the first few days. We had two guys punching on and they landed on top of two young girls, seven and nine, I think, and then the guy tried to pick up a big rock—this big—to throw at me because we were trying to get rid of him and get him out of there. He was in that room where there were hundreds of people sleeping—men, women and children, and animals, all in that one big room. So we need security and police from day dot. That needs to be done.

I've got so much more to say. SCU access was a big problem. One of the issues DCJ had with control was at one point one of the members of the public picked up a vest and started running the centre for three days and police had to get involved. That's how insecure this thing was. The SCU access is also a problem because it floods in East Lismore—main roads in and the main road out going up the hill up to Lismore Heights. I was literally live streaming the road as my car was going like this, up and down, with the water under the road. All I got was a message from the SES saying, "Get off the road." Well, there was nowhere else for me to go because that was the access in and out to the evacuation centre. That was something that was—the video is still online and available.

I'll just quickly deal with floodlights. I'm jumping ahead because I know I'm out of time. People are talking about this one-in-100-chance flood. It's not a one-in-100-year flood. It's a chance. It can happen every day for five days and then for 500 years it doesn't happen again. It's still a one-in-100-chance, according to the statistics. But our PMF—probable maximum flood—height has always been 15.9 metres. Recently it got upgraded to 16.55 metres allowing for various things, including climate change. So that has been incorporated. There's also what's called a freeboard of 0.5 metres. Then we have a big gradient in Lismore, which can be up to 0.25 metres. We can actually start flooding when the gauge at the rowing club reaches, I think it's 10.2, because the levy's 10.95. That takes it to 17.3 metres. This is one of the big reasons I don't support things like house raising, because

at that level, because that is where you have got to go to, to go on what we know, or what we think we know, that's where you've got to go to, to get out of it. The velocity of the water is very high, very fast. The debris is like torpedoes. We saw it at 14.39. It's going to knock houses. That's what it did, knock houses off their thing, and people get complacent and think they are safe. They get isolated, water, power, sewerage goes off. Rescuers have to get there. If you get injured you need a helicopter. It is things like that we need to discuss and prepare for and have it ready before the event, and ongoing, hopefully with disaster management committees at the local council level, not at State or Federal levels. Is that my time? Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, sir.

Ms VERONICA COUGHLAN, before the Committee: I have been here since half past 12, so I don't know if I can keep functioning, but there you are. Thank you for today. Mine is the microcosm story really. I'm here as a grandmother and a mother and a mother-in-law. I've been here for 37 years. I'm still not quite a local but my daughters are and my granddaughters are. I was involved in many floods at Trinity Catholic College over the years, so I am familiar with floods. This is the first time though it has affected my family directly. At about half past five on Monday 28 February I had been listening to the local radio. I called my son-in-law in Molesworth Street. I said, "I think you'd better get out of there." His wife—my daughter—and two granddaughters had come to my place the night before, but they were pretty sure they could go back in the morning and get what they needed, because in 2017 it didn't go into that house, which was brand new to them in 2017. There had been no flood in that house for 100 years. It had been under the house but not in.

At half past five when I called him, he woke up. He had been picking stuff up from under the house at half past two to three o'clock. But at half past five it was on the twelfth step at the front and within 20 minutes, as he collected passports and a few other items, he came then to the front steps to the landing to see what he could do. He had a little dog with him, and the water was up to his waist. He put the dog up onto the roof. I don't know how he did it. He's a bit of a surfer, which is a blessing. He's an Indonesian who has seen earthquakes and volcanos erupting. This was scary. He waited for the water to get high enough for him to swim to the roof next door. He told me this the night after. The presence of mind was wonderful. He said, "If I jumped and left I could have just missed." So he swam and he got onto that roof, and he was able to send a photo of himself then, and then the mobile was too waterlogged. So for five hours we had no idea what was happening. But at half past five I'd rung 000 and SES. I got really supportive people and the SES assured me as soon as possible there would be an officer there to save him. My daughter called a good friend of hers who had a little tinny.

At about 11 o'clock eventually my son-in-law appeared. Those five hours were rather stressful. And what had happened was that the man with the tinny, his friend, his best man at his wedding, was told by the SES, "No, you can't come in, it is too dangerous, go back." So he hadn't come to save him. But there was a woman about four doors up from him and her son had come in a big fishing boat, a bigger one anyway. Picked her up, then the woman and daughter next door to my daughter's house, then the little dog jumped in and my son-in-law. The son-in-law then saved two people across the road. One woman was all locked in. He smashed open the window with part of a fishing rod, pulled her through the broken window to safety. And I suppose what really gave us such false hope and a lot of nightmares was that I had my faith in the SES, I had my faith in the young man who would have gone in, but he was not able to go into the water, and that frightened us. There were so many other things. There's the aftermath of it as well. But look—I may not get to do this. I wanted to read something to you. My daughter wrote:

My heart hurts.
My swollen heart overflowing with sadness.
My heart's erratic rhythm quickens and slows with pains for my people.
My racing heart jolts me awake at wee hours with urgency for action.
My little girl's heart longs to "just be in my own bed mummy".
My big girl's heart searches for a sense of justice for all swept up in this destruction.
My heart feels numb, pushing away what ifs I cannot yet face.
My expanding heart is making room for the boundless generosity of so many.
We are hardwired for kindness it seems.
My constricted heart is consumed with aching compassion for friends who are our family.
My heart sparks with joy at the rainbow birds overhead oblivious to us. They continue.
Emotional deluge flowing.
We are reduced. But we are rising on a tide of love.
Love more Lismore.

She wrote that 10 days later when the little girls were at my place having nightmares about rain and storms and things. I could say much more but thank you for listening.

The CHAIR: Thank you, ma'am.

Mr MARCUS BEBB, before the Committee: That's a hard one to follow.

The CHAIR: And we didn't stick to five minutes on that one.

MARCUS BEBB: I think we all feel what that one was. My story; I'm 68 Elliott Road. I've got a family of five. The morning of the flood, the same that you are going to be told everywhere, it came fast, no warning. When I say no warning, we had warning that it was '74 height, 12 metres, we'll all be right. I had a RFS bloke tell me—sorry, that's got me really caught up—the night before the flood that we'll be right. My floorboards are 12.2 metres. You are safe 14.4 metres. I say 15 metres because from my floorboards to my floodmark is three metres. We lost everything. I got an esky delivered two days ago from three streets over, that washed out of my house. We had cattle, we had couches, we had everything.

The morning of that flood my brother-in-law picked us up. I did rescues for three or four hours, pulling young families out of roof cavities, elderly people out of bathroom windows, stuff that keeps you awake at night. You'll hear it again. I had an SES bloke, the only SES bloke that I saw in South Lismore that morning, tell me to stop rescuing people, nobody's coming. At that stage we were pulling people out of houses and putting them on Ballina Street Bridge. Ballina Street Bridge—never thought I'd stand on that thing and have water run through my kneecaps. I dream about that. That's—gut wrenching is the word that I use. I was here today, you asked a few questions of a few people today. Our hubs, what we call our hubs, our Lifeline centre out at Wyrallah Road, Lifeline closes next month.

I live in a caravan at the showground. I've got no cooking facilities, I've got no cupboards. We go to Woolies every day to buy meat and veggies. Everything else I get from Lifeline. It's not because I can't afford to go shopping. No point going shopping and buying a heap of stuff. I think Steve said today that people are going there three times a day. That's us. We're going there three times a day. The breeze and the wind the last couple of nights, we have been going to Lifeline and getting blankets. We don't have blankets. We can't go to Big W, we can't go to Kmart. We can't afford to drive to Ballina, we can't afford to drive to Casino. It's Lifeline. Orange Sky washing machines. We talked about kitchens today, washing machines. I don't have a washing machine; I don't know anybody that does at the moment. We use Orange Sky, and Orange Sky at the showground leaves in a month's time. I know that's not government, but it's washing machines. Cooking—I know Steve said today about the barbecues, and that's what we're using. We're using a gas hot water system for our hot water system, a camping one. We got told when we were buying it not to use it for what we use it for, but we've got no choice. Unless we're boiling water and using it out of a bucket, that's what we've got.

Schooling—I know they touched on that today. I've got three teenagers; two of them are doing year 10. They haven't had school for three years; that's the reality. They're doing online schooling. My son's academic; my daughter's not. Trying to juggle that when they don't have a school, a physical building, we got told by the department and we got told by the school that last term we would have had one. We're still waiting, and it's got nothing to do with the department—sort of. The bloody weather has just screwed them.

Back to May—rain. I know you've probably heard it and you'll probably hear it again: Rain on my head reminds me of sitting on my roof. Rain on my head reminds me of sitting on the bridge, sitting in the boat. Laying at night in a caravan, because that's what we're living in, rain on that roof or that canvas is driving us insane. You touched today on our accommodation. Resilience NSW—all I can do is laugh. Give me five minutes; let me run the place. It's got to be better than what's going on at the moment. In my situation, we live in Lismore. The kids go to school in Lismore. We can't live in Wollongbar, we can't live in Ballina, we can't live in Evans Head and we can't live in Casino. This is where work is; this is where life is. This is home.

I'm fully insured. Beautiful, great, brilliant—I thought so, but not really. CommInsure is screwing us around. We can't get anybody at the house to look at the house. I've still got mould; my walls are standing by mould. The insurance assessor engineer came a week ago and said to us five weeks before he reports in. We went to an insurance thing the other day, and apparently that's expertise. There's not enough, blah, blah, blah. I completely understand—with 2,500 houses in Lismore, there's going to be a shortage somewhere. But I'm sitting here going, "You are supposed to be helping us", just in general. We've got politicians sitting here today and going, "Why aren't we helping?" I knew very quickly about the caravans coming to the Northern Rivers, three days before the local State MP. That's because I rang four government departments asking for somewhere to live for my family, three weeks after a flood. The response I kept getting was that we have an evac centre. We've heard about the evac centres.

Where am I living? My father-in-law said, "Oh, you've got accommodation". No, that's couch surfing; that's temporary accommodation. That's somewhere we sent the kids the night before the flood. It's not something that you set up in. I got paid accommodation from my insurance company. That paid for a caravan. I'm looking at three years if they rebuild. I had a conversation with my wife this afternoon. If they rebuild and in 12 months' time you decide we're doing buyback, where does that leave me? If I take a cash settlement then I'm in the same

situation. If you do a buyback, we do a scheme and we do whatever you're looking at, we need to know that stuff now. I'm sitting in limbo, sort of waiting. Anyway, happy to talk more to you, but I'll leave you be. Thank you.

WOLFGANG SMITH, before the Committee: Hello, thanks for having me. My background—I'm an Australian Army veteran and a communication logistics HR specialist, and I currently work in disability and mental health around the region. During the floods I acted as a volunteer coordinator as part of the health response, so I'm coordinating efforts of volunteer doctors, nurses, psychologists, mental health people and supports. I visited and liaised with multiple evac centres and sites around the area during both floods. I liaised with people from managers in the primary health network, the local health district, team leaders from the Australian Defence Force, Rural Fire Service, Disaster Relief Australia and civilian search-and-rescue teams. I ended up being one of the coordinators for the civilian search-and-rescue teams down in the Coraki, Bungawalbin and Ellangowan regions. From my experience and the people I've worked with, we identified a bunch of gaps in the crisis health response which pertained to medical, mental health, disability and culturally and linguistically sensitive and specific health care.

My experience and that of the people I worked with has been communicated in the independent flood inquiry—that is the one that's separate to this—so I won't cover it here. These recommendations that I'm about to list are evidenced by my experience and that of the people I worked with, and can be elaborated on further if anyone is interested. I'll just read through them. Essentially, the State emergency management plan needs to be reviewed and updated so that it is, one, fit for purpose for disasters of increasing frequency and magnitude and, two, appropriately designed for areas of concern—urban, regional, rural and remote—because it's now broad and blanket and doesn't fit. We must address the issues of planning and preparation to move from a state of reactionary response, which is inadequate at that, to one of preparedness and address the overall problems with command, control and communication that see the emergency response departments operate in silos.

It's been touched on heaps, but we need a complete review and overhaul of the Department of Communities and Justice in their role of disaster welfare and what is expected of them in their roles and responsibilities related to health, because I don't think it's clear for them or the people who are working in the health departments. There's a huge gap that is left there with needs. People who are holding functional area coordinator roles within the emergency management plans need to be reassessed for suitability and subsequently replaced or retrained. Increased inter-agency training and communication managers between emergency response departments will hopefully alleviate some of that situation where people are operating in silos, which are silos within evac centres themselves, between evac centres and local areas, and then across the region. The primary health network and local health district require a needs assessment to be conducted for the crisis health response to better inform needs and define individual department roles and responsibilities, because each department doesn't know where they sit and who covers what. Even if they tell you they do, our experience is that they don't.

There needs to be the creation of a dedicated disaster response health team that operates within the local and regional emergency operations command centres, which will improve health-related crisis response, communications and control and reduce the over-reliance on volunteer SES operators who are not adequately trained in crisis health response. The creation of a dedicated volunteer coordinator to act as an interface between emergency services and the essential volunteer workforce is necessary in disasters of this magnitude, where they do the bulk of the response. We need funding for the development of community-led disaster response strategies that allows for a coordinated and resourced volunteer response capability for health and welfare.

We recommend the creation of a virtual and/or cloud-based system for health resources templates, referral pathways, key points of contact, supply and equipment options that can be accessed by health volunteers during a crisis, which could include an opt-in for service providers. I've only got a couple more points. For example, in case of a disaster—and this can apply across the State—are you prepared to step in? Here's the tools, resources and information you need. There needs to be an investigation into, and mitigation of, the logistics staffing and supply issues caused by localised disaster impact, whether it is flood or fire, as well as subsequent road closures and contingency plans to be developed because we heard, "We don't have staff to do this. We don't have this resource to do that because this road is cut off." But, as Big Rob mentioned, there could be dedicated areas for those resources. Looking at the modelling that Dr Hanabeth Luke mentioned, you can see which areas are cut off or not during—if we use here as an example—the flood.

There should be improvement and development of strategies and methods for adequate and timely gathering, and dissemination of information to disaster-affected residents and the volunteers helping them because that disaster to the ground and from it didn't occur. There was a lot of meta management happening with emergency services. They were all talking amongst themselves and the people on the ground are like, "We don't know what's happening," so they fill in those gaps, that void, that's left. There should be increased funding in health to ensure that the system can adequately respond during crises and they're not strapped and struggling at the best of times.

There should be a dedicated disability focus response plan because they were completely missed. I didn't hear the word "disability" mentioned. It was community groups that were responding and saying, "I'm not cut off. I can access this area. How can I help you? I've got a spare sling." Or, "I can do this. I work in disability support around my area. I can come and help whoever needs it." A lot of people were doing that. There wasn't, from what we could see, a dedicated and organised department offering that help. Also plan for cultural and linguistically appropriate responses. For, Coraki, for example, there's a large Indigenous community down there and there was no dedicated service. They struggled for the fundamental basics even at first responder level, but there wasn't anything for those people. Thank you.

Ms JUDE FORSYTH, before the Committee: Thank you for the opportunity to speak. I've come a bit unprepared. David Tomlinson is not able to speak. He's not here so I'll attempt to speak on his behalf. I'm a relatively new resident to Lismore. I moved up here three years ago, although I have been visiting the area for quite a number of years as I have friends up here and have been well aware that this area is very flood prone. I didn't know it was fire prone until 2019 when the rainforest burnt—but flood prone, yes. I was lucky enough to be able to buy above the flood zone and that has stood me and my friends who've been flood affected in good stead in that we've had somewhere to stay. So I've had a house full of flood refugees since the flood started. They are still homeless. Their houses are still stripped. There are no doors and no windows. They're struggling to get monetary or financial assistance. I think we've heard enough speakers here today to say that the hoops that people have to jump through to try and get assistance are insurmountable and frustrating, and are now leading to despair, in my view. David and I have been discussing how we may assist or promote a way forward for Lismore from this disaster, given that we are looking at our friends in the community moving, as I said, to despair now.

It's 13 weeks post floods and people are feeling very much, as we've already heard tonight, as if they're in limbo completely. There are a number of things that are problematical for the community, and that is communication processes throughout this response have been probably patchy. I'm not laying blame anywhere, but I think that there needs to be a clearer move from council to communicate more forthrightly what the plan may be or to at least consult a little bit more frequently to determine a way forward for Lismore. People don't know whether to sell their houses, whether to fix their houses. They're fixing them because they don't have anywhere to live, but as one friend said to me today, "I don't know whether my house is going to be picked up and moved, or demolished. I've got nowhere to live. I can't move on. I'm stuck." And he's stuck because he can't get financial assistance either. This is a very common story. I think the broader plan for how Lismore might recover is not being discussed properly or communicated very well either. I hear little about adaptation processes, which need to be adopted because we know Lismore will flood again because of climate change.

There is a need for both Federal and State governments to start pouring in monetary resources. As far as we can see, the financial assistance is very held up. There's some $200 million, I believe, held up until there's a CSIRO report. There's money elsewhere that doesn't seem to be flowing into the community in a meaningful and useful way. I think as the State Government you could really be looking at that and how that might work better. I hope with the new Federal Government that there might be better resources forthcoming for Lismore. I understand that in Queensland they got a $774 million grant fairly quickly and it's not been tied to particular types of spending. The other thing that I will very quickly say is, the other thing that struck me since I moved up here, and it's been alluded to by number of speakers tonight, is maybe the lack of preparedness for floods. There's a real need to get a community-led organisation that deals with the floods that is able to coordinate it, that includes very much the Indigenous knowledge and the ability to communicate with their groups. As Naomi pointed out, they do so effectively. A community-led response and recovery organisation is very much needed. It needs to be from the ground up. The top-down hasn't worked. We heard from Janelle that Resilience NSW has failed miserably. Rous is in disarray in terms of infrastructure mitigation. There's so much to be done. The local community needs to be harnessed, used, funded and supported. Thank you.

Mr NIGEL KIRWAN, before the Committee: Thank you, Chairman and members of the Committee. I'm Nigel Kirwan. My maternal side of the family is a Northern Rivers farming family. I grew up in country New South Wales. I lived in Byron Bay for 12½ years; I now live in Alstonville. I'm a principal of a company called PREMA Capital with offices in Brisbane and Hong Kong. I'm also a director of Northern Regional Rail Company and I'm a member of the Northern Rivers Railway Action Group and Northern Rivers rail company. I advise both, but I'm not here just to bang on about rail. I'm glad I heard so many of the earlier speakers and, living in Alstonville, I am again reminded of survivor guilt. There is so much grief, so much sadness and so much trauma that we have witnessed living on a plateau with two major cities either side going through what they went through.

I'm not so much here to talk about what the Government should pay for or anything like that. My background is business, but please do not cast me in any particular light because of that. I've only ever worked in business. I have witnessed, already, a failure in terms of the coordination between two essential parts of the community, which is the private and public sectors. I urge everyone in the New South Wales Government to get

on board something which the Queensland Government is adopting very strongly and thoroughly. That's having business continuity plans. That might sound like jargon, but essentially it's the master plan for managing anything that might come along—any eventuality—at a State, regional and local level. It's about communities. In terms of these communities, I would contend that the communities of the Northern Rivers—I will go out on a limb here and say that most people from Sydney just don't have a clue. You're too far from it. I love Sydney. I go there all the time, and I'm always happy to get out of it. I've spent most of my life there actually. But you're just so disconnected from the reality. These people here, time and again it sounds like something from the collapse of the Soviet Union, what they are describing, in terms of the public response.

But in terms of these communities that I mentioned, one could easily argue that they are what is called a polycentric, dissipated city. It's the concept of the ideal city. If you go from the river basin, if you like—the Richmond, Brunswick and Tweed River basins and the towns and cities in those basins—you've got 300,000 people. The way they develop can be very much guided by government. That's the role of government, and the way they respond to situations like this is up to government. But I'll give you an example of the prescience of government with respect to rail. Back in 1963, when they were tearing up the South Coast line in Queensland, Sir Gordon Chalk—some of us are old enough to remember that name. When people were imploring him not to tear up the rail—that was the last section between Beenleigh, Nerang and Southport—he said, "By 1970, everyone will be flying in helicopters." So he was just a little bit ahead of his time.

The lack of political foresight with respect to this railway here—there is a private, strategic plan that I'm part of developing. It involves a disruptor when it comes to supply chain logistics. The pandemic and the flood identified the stupidity of supermarkets being packed in Melbourne and shipped up here. Also, what these communities went through with the pandemic and the lockdowns—because the majority of people here, one way or the other, are interfacing more with Brisbane and the Gold Coast. It's just a reality. But the supply chain logistics—we don't need $60 million warehouses, $20 million warehouses and cold stores. We can actually have a system which also assists with getting stock in and out fast so that retailers don't have to have stock sitting around on their floor space and not be able to get it out by truck. We can have just-in-time inventory management and also return commuter rail. Thank you.

STEWART JAMES, before the Committee: Before the floods and after the floods, our communities—from Casino and Murwillumbah and everywhere in-between—need connection. They need connection of the railway system that has commuter trains, not an XPT. We need an XPT as well but we need commuter services so people can access mental health resources and health resources, and can get education. These rail services would be complemented by minibus services that complement them and bridge gaps like, say, from the railway station to the hospital precinct and the university. So, yes, our communities are desperate for connection and mobility. It's a young person's right to get on public transport and be independent. This is about people learning how to travel, how to conduct themselves in our communities. We're denying them that whole experience. Consequently, they rely on their parents to drive them around. When they get their licence, their parents worry about them going around at night-time in vehicles.

We desperately need connections. We need an integrated transport system and we need our trains reinstated. It seems funny that the Government is paying to rip up this valuable railway infrastructure so people can walk and cycle. After the flood are you prepared to say to Lismore people, "You're going to get a cycleway; now you can walk." I'd like you to think about how that might be received. They need to be able to get to the beach. People from the beach need to be able to get to Lismore—to medical services and education. There are 2.4 million visitors to the Byron Coast every year. We could have a slice of those people come on a regular commuter train and have dinner and a show at NORPA and the regional art gallery. That would make them sustainable—those two organisations—which are currently costing council money to the tune of millions of dollars. So we could make this a sustainable thing where we get the numbers coming in from the coast. My lips are really dry. I'm going to stop there.

BETH SHELLEY, before the Committee: I want to start by talking about flood preparation. I've been here since 1980. I was talking to someone who has lived here all their lives—more than 60 years. In the past I heard many times about how people out in the hills would contact SES or public service management about what was happening out there. They would give warning as to what was coming. This friend who's been here a long time said he actually got a call on the Sunday afternoon at two o'clock to say that at Dunoon they were seeing nine metres of water, it was heading for Lismore and it was going to be a catastrophe. From watching what happened that night and the next day, that warning didn't get through.

I heard after the 2017 flood that the SES management was happening in Wollongong or somewhere; it wasn't the local system anymore. The local system that used to work had been lost. Also, this friend told me that a few decades ago there were 21 SES boats in Lismore; this time there were two. It seems as if, in terms of

preparation and support for people in that flood situation, this has been really lost over time. I've read many times in articles how funding was being cut to these services.

The other point that I wanted to make is that ever since then, driving around our roads, every day it seems like there's another pothole. I don't know how the roads are ever going to be repaired in this area. It's like, there's more rain. The thing that I've learnt is that it's the heavy trucks that constantly go around this area that cause a lot of damage to the roads. Then the rain happens and—bang—there are 10 million potholes everywhere. It just seems to me, at the same time, that what we've been talking about is that there's a railway—the local railway that has serviced this community for 120 years is in the process of being ripped up right now. That could be preserving our roads by carrying freight and passengers, instead of everything going on the roads. These roads around here are never going to—how many millions and billions is it going to take to repair them?

Just listening to everyone tonight, it just reminds me I was flooded in for five days but my daughter and her family were renting in North Lismore; they lost everything. So many people I know lost everything. Every time you go through Lismore—because you have to go up to Goonellabah to go to the shops—it's dead and destroyed. It's devastating. It just seems as if government has deserted us and has ignored Lismore and the Northern Rivers for so long. We are so far from Sydney. Who in Sydney knows anything about what's happening up here? The only place they've heard of is Byron Bay. But the railway goes through Byron Bay, with millions of tourists going there. It's an absurdity that it's being ripped up.

STEWART PRINS, before the Committee: I did lose my house in the flood, but I am here to address you in my volunteer capacity as the president of the Men and Family Centre. The Men and Family Centre is a local, community-based organisation that works to address domestic and family violence and to build safe, respectful relationships. We have two primary streams of work. Firstly, we run men's behaviour change programs for men who have used violence, intimidation and coercion in their personal relationships, working directly with men who have been identified as perpetrators or are concerned about their own behaviour. Secondly, we engage in primary prevention activities at a community level to address the underlying drivers of domestic and family violence. Our programs are funded by the New South Wales State Government, and we are very grateful for that continued support.

It is well known and understood that there is usually a spike in the level of family violence in communities following natural disasters of the nature we have seen in the Northern Rivers. It is our expectation, therefore, that there will be a significantly increased need for the direct interventions that we provide through our programs over the next few months. However, this could be mitigated by strengthening the social services safety net in our region and through an extra effort on primary prevention. In fact, if it is done well, there could actually be an opportunity out of this tragedy and this disaster to trial a more comprehensive approach to reducing family and domestic violence in the community and the region. Out of disaster, we could actually do something quite revolutionary here in the Northern Rivers. With this in mind, I would like to put forward three suggestions that could underpin a community-wide approach to minimising harm from domestic and family violence.

Firstly, we could establish a social services coordination and case management function with one lead agency, such as new Northern Rivers Reconstruction Corporation, to stop people from falling through the net of social services. This case management function should include referrals to local service organisations such as the Men and Family Centre, where appropriate. I recognise that this would involve an expansion in the role and scope of the reconstruction corporation, but the reconstruction effort should not just be limited to fixing hard infrastructure, it should also help people to rebuild their lives as well.

Secondly, we could enlist the support of the whole community in the effort to combat family violence. One way to do that would be to ensure that all local employers provide their staff with bystander intervention training so that people can more readily identify the warning signs that someone may either be experiencing or committing domestic violence and to help them respond appropriately. This community banded together to keep people safe from the rising floodwaters. So why not use that same spirit to keep people safe from family violence?

Thirdly, as you have already heard, there is a critical need for housing, both short and long term, especially for women and children escaping violence at home. This is absolutely fundamental. We need urgent investment in social housing and emergency housing so that people have a safe space to go to if and when they need it. My plea for you tonight is: Don't overlook the ongoing social and human consequences of the floods. The potholed roads, the empty shops and the boarded-up houses are easy to see, but the emotional and psychological wounds are not, the stresses on families are not, and these problems are not going to disappear. They will be with us for a long time to come and we will need a long-term commitment and strategy to deal with that. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, sir.

DEBORAH RAY, before the Committee: Thanks for the opportunity to speak. I was fortunate that I evacuated my house early when the flood was happening. Unlike many of my neighbours and friends, I did not have a near-death experience nor any really harrowing trauma of having to be rescued from my roof or out of my house while up to my neck in water. So that is a blessing. I live in South Lismore and in the 2017 flood it was one step from coming upstairs into my house. This time it went right up to the ceiling and I lost everything. I left with my dog, my partner and our passports. I also have a business in town. I have a CD and record shop, which has been going since 1993. In 2009 I got a mortgage on the building. After the 2017 flood, where I lost a lot of stock and underneath my house got flooded, I decided to take out another mortgage to convert the office space above into apartments, thinking that that was above the highest flood level in recorded history here.

Therefore that was my way of safeguarding myself financially for the future, as people would always need housing. It was also really encouraged by council to do shop-top housing, to have a diversity of styles of housing in the area. This flood went chest high upstairs in my apartments. So I have lost my apartments, I have lost my shop, my business, and I have lost my home. Both of my tenants I advised to leave, not because I thought they were in danger but because I thought it would be unpleasant to be stuck surrounded by floodwater. Neither of them did, so they were both rescued by boat. One of them was crouching on a narrow window ledge with the water up to her chest for hours and hours waiting to be rescued, completely unable to get to the roof or any awning or anything.

There are a couple of things that I want to talk about. One is that there does not seem to have been any financial assistance from the Government when it comes to commercial landlords. I was really fortunate that my house was insured for floods. Most of my neighbours have been quoted unaffordable amounts for some random reason. It is not across the board. I pay about $5,500 a year and I am completely covered for flood. My house is lower than most of my neighbours, which was why we left, because we were not sure that we would be above the flood level. Some of my neighbours have raised their houses. Most of them were about 12.5 or 13.5 metres, so they felt safe to stay and ended up fighting for their lives. But they were quoted $27,000 a year for flood insurance on their homes or told they were uninsurable. I don't understand the discrepancy about why it is so different.

I just got my new amounts and I think it is more like 10 grand a year they want to charge me now. I have nothing left to insure anyway, so there is no point me getting flood insurance next year. But there is nothing for commercial landlords, so our town is dying. It is dying really badly. As a business I managed to get the $50,000 business grant to restart my business, which I have not started to spend yet because I am still attempting to get the building dry, I am still trying to get wet stock down and I am also having to tear apart the apartments that I have just built—tearing up the floors, pulling out kitchens, ripping out mouldy walls. But I just can't understand why there has been no funding for commercial landlords. There are many businesses who have the money to come back but they have no premises to come back into. It just doesn't make any sense that both those things were not rolled out together. Meanwhile there are all of these empty shops in town.

People are frustrated that their landlords are not doing anything, but they don't have the money to do anything. I have heard it suggested today that there are three companies or people who own a lot of the property in the CBD here and that one of them is an insurance company, or maybe a couple of them are, or they are superannuation companies that have a lot of money. Maybe the Government is hesitant to roll out grants for people who actually could afford to be doing something. I am not sure of the truth of that. But there are also a lot of people like me who have put decades of work into building a business and owning our properties here in the town and we are just left stranded. I also want to say that it is not just Lismore. I spent a while living in Kyogle because we were also homeless at this point whilst our house had been stripped out. I realised that losing Lismore is also a loss to Kyogle and Casino and Nimbin. It is all of our towns. We need this hub. But we need better solutions and I don't feel safe in any of the premises that I own. We need some solutions to move to safer places.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Ray.

ANA WOJAK, before the Committee: Hi, my name is Ana Wojak and this is my neighbour, Marion Conrow. We both live in South Lismore. We have known each other for over 30 years. Marion is currently camped in a caravan at the bottom of my yard because her house has been not only inundated but it has also been completely covered in asphalt by Boral, who are two doors up. I think it is important that you hear her story. Thank you.

MARION CONROW, before the Committee: Hi, my name is Marion Conrow. I've had my home for 33 years. I'm an artist. It's my business. It's my home. In this last flood, Boral asphalt spilt on quite a bit of Lismore but my house is very badly affected. I need to go home. I need to go home now. No-one has done anything. There is bitumen right through the creek. It is going into Hollingworth Creek. It is going into the Wilsons River. It is a disgrace. The council is doing nothing. The EPA is doing nothing. Boral has done nothing so far except put a

fence around my yard. It's three months on and I don't understand how this is possible. I want to bring that to the table. I don't think there should be toxins lying around in flood areas. They just shouldn't be there.

The other issue I have is that I don't understand why the levee bank, when we knew it was going to be a big fall, why they were used because we know they cause impact damage. The use of levees and the build-up into the flood plain is of concern. There is a lot of us that are homeless. We're artists, we're a community. We don't know where we're going. I've just made a decision I'm going to move into an asphalt-covered room because I can't handle living in a small space. I need amenities and I've got a brain injury. I need to go home now. That's all I have to say.

The CHAIR: Thank you, ma'am.

ANA WOJAK: I'd just like to add, too, that not only has that Boral spill impacted people's homes but, as Marion pointed out, it is actually an environmental disaster. There's a small creek that completely surrounds her block. There's an empty block that is supposedly greenery—it's coated in bitumen. That creek is coated in bitumen. It's flowing into Hollingworth Creek, which then flows into the river. Three months on, nothing has been done about the fact that there is an environmental disaster in the middle of South Lismore, which is coating not just Marion's house but quite a number of houses further down the road, as well as the actual watercourse. It is affecting that watercourse. Yes, I was flood affected in what was supposedly a flood-proof house—and I am back in it—but at least I'm not coated in bitumen. The fact that, three months on, nothing has been done about what is an environmental disaster in a built-up area needs to be looked at. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

KIRSTY MEDINA, before the Committee: I'm a bit nervous. It's been an emotional evening listening to everybody. My name is Kirsty. Thank you for listening to me. I will try to keep it on the straight and narrow but I might bounce around. I live in North Lismore. Myself and my partner purchased our house after the 2017 floods. I'm originally from Melbourne so I am a city slicker. We were not prepared for what we went through on 28 February. It was real. It was traumatic. I feared for our lives. At about eight o'clock on the Sunday evening I made a decision to get my daughter out of our house and take her up to Goonellabah because I knew she would be safe up there. If water got up there, we were all stuffed. Then I chose to go back to the house because I had my father, my partner, we had two little dogs and my daughter's rabbit. I made a promise that I would save her rabbit. My father also lives with us and relocated from Melbourne.

We built a life here. Me and my daughter, we were displaced from domestic violence. We relocated to this area thinking we were safe. We purchased our house. I had done my due diligence. I got all the council documents. I knew our floor levels. I was insured; we were lucky to be fully insured. It was affordable for us as full-time workers paying $280 a month, yet our neighbours across the road, a few doors down, had been quoted $25,000 to $50,000 a year. I guess my point, in terms of the insurance, is there needs to be—I know there's something up on northern Queensland that is a State Government or Federal Government insurance scheme. It needs to be level across the board if we are expected to live in these sorts of impacted areas. Do I want to stay living there? I don't want to go through it for a second time.

We've had a nightmare with our insurance company. They have started dismantling the house. It is also an historic building in North Lismore. We know the building is salvageable. We need action. We need the option to be able to move our house and repair it. Lismore City Council, I have gone to all the other meetings and the inquiries that we have had. They've openly said they cannot afford and will not be able to come to the party and help fund land swaps, buybacks—they said they're several million dollars in debt. We need action. While they're all arguing amongst themselves on who did this and blaming the last five years and 10 years of issues, we need action now as residents—and not just for us. Everything we speak about today, in 100 years we'll all be dead. I'm sorry for the expression, but what about our children and our children's children? I just ask for you guys to please—we need people to make some decisions, and serious ones.

The only other thing is that we were told—I rang 000 on the night. It was about four o'clock in the morning. We had water coming through our floor and I felt the brick wall of our house move. I was told to get in my roof cavity by 000. I don't blame that person, but I think we need a real look at the support that our emergency services have—technology, everything. On that information that they supplied—if I get told to get in my roof, I want a way out. If we've got smoke detectors to detect smoke, why don't we have attic staircases? They cost up to $1,000. Why don't we have skylights so that people can actually get out of a tin roof? They are just simple things, I think, that will be effective if people have to live in these areas. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Ladies and gentlemen, that concludes the list of our registered speakers. For anyone who has not spoken today but would like to share their story, there is an online questionnaire. The

secretariat staff have brochures with information on it available for those who want to, along with a code. That brings our hearing to a conclusion. Thank you for your time.

Public forum concluded.

(The Committee adjourned at 20:38.)