

REPORT ON PROCEEDINGS BEFORE

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

CORRECTED

At Windsor RSL, 36 Argyle Street, South Windsor, on Friday 3 June 2022

The Committee met at 14:00.

PRESENT

The Hon. Walt Secord (Chair)

The Hon. Scott Barrett

The Hon. Catherine Cusack

Ms Cate Faehrmann

Ms Sue Higginson

The Hon. Rod Roberts

The Hon. Penny Sharpe

The CHAIR: Welcome to the fourth 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 by the Government to the North Coast and western Sydney floods. 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. We are separate to the Perrottet Government. I acknowledge the traditional custodians of the lands on which we are gathered today. I pay my respect to Elders past, present and emerging and celebrate the diversity of Aboriginal peoples and their ongoing cultures and connections to the lands and waters of New South Wales. I also acknowledge and pay my respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who may be joining us today.

Today we will be hearing from a number of stakeholders, including the Federal member for Macquarie, Ms Susan Templeman; the member for Hawkesbury, Ms Robyn Preston; and the mayor of Hawkesbury City Council, Councillor Patrick Conolly. We will also be hearing from the Hawkesbury City Chamber of Commerce and the Western Sydney Business Centre. I thank everyone for making the time to give evidence today to this important inquiry. Before we commence, I would like to make some brief comments about the procedures for today's hearings. Today's hearings are being broadcast live via the Parliament's website. A transcript of today's hearing will be placed on the Committee's website when it becomes available. In accordance with broadcasting guidelines, media representatives are reminded that they must take responsibility for what they publish of the Committee's proceedings.

While parliamentary privilege applies to witnesses giving evidence today, it does not apply to what witnesses say outside their evidence at the hearing. I therefore 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 be 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 issues raised by the inquiry's terms of reference and avoid naming individuals unnecessarily. All witnesses have a right to procedural fairness according to the procedural fairness resolution adopted by the House in 2018. If witnesses are unable to answer a question today and want more time to respond, they can take a question on notice. Written answers to questions taken on notice are provided within 21 days. If witnesses wish to hand up documents to the Committee, they may do so through the Committee's staff. In terms of audibility of today's hearing, I remind both Committee members and witnesses to speak into the microphone. Finally, could everyone in this room turn their mobile phones silent for the duration of the hearing.

Ms SUSAN TEMPLEMAN, Federal member for Macquarie, Parliament of Australia, affirmed and examined
Ms ROBYN PRESTON, State member for Hawkesbury, Parliament of New South Wales, before the Committee
Councillor PATRICK CONOLLY, Mayor, Hawkesbury City Council, sworn and examined
Ms ELIZABETH RICHARDSON, General Manager, Hawkesbury City Council, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: Under the standing orders, there is a provision for a short opening statement, if you wish to partake of that. Ms Templeman, Ms Preston and Councillor Conolly, I assume that all three of you would like to make an opening statement. I will start with Ms Templeman.

SUSAN TEMPLEMAN: Thank you for coming to the Hawkesbury. I want to touch on a few things. One is about the scale of the impact that the 2022 floods have had; one is around the impact on businesses; another, around the impact on individuals. And I want to touch on housing and evacuation routes. I will do that as succinctly as I can. We're very conscious that the effect we've had in the Hawkesbury is different to what you will have seen in the early part of this week on the North Coast. But the context I want you to have is that our 2022 flood came on the back of fires in 2019-20, a small flood in that year, and a year later a major flood in 2021. So it cannot be seen in isolation. This community has been through those multiple traumas, three natural disasters in the space of two years. That gives a different context to what people are experiencing now and still trying to recover from.

In terms of the impacts, it is of a different scale. We've had eight residences completely destroyed in the Hawkesbury, 627 homes damaged—164 of them have been deemed uninhabitable. That gives you a scale of the numbers. But what you've seen today in touring around the Hawkesbury is some of the infrastructure challenges that we have. Massive holes gouged out of the side of the riverbank that are affecting roads—they just don't exist anymore. They're affecting businesses, like our caravan ski parks. They're affecting individual homes as well as our turf and farmers. That is taking an enormous emotional toll on people. We got a glimpse of that just a little over an hour ago when you saw turf farmers who are suffering physical and mental health consequences, not just as a result of the natural disaster but of the very slow response that has been delivered to them.

I think the example on Cornwallis Road, where impacts from 2020, 2021 and now 2022 are ruining their businesses. These are farmers who cannot farm, they cannot plant. They have no confidence in the integrity of their properties. What these farmers need is for someone to fix it. It may well be a council responsibility, but it is not good enough for the State Government to sit back and wait for someone to fix it. This has to be fixed with a sense of urgency. If it had had a sense of urgency in 2021, we would not be looking at giant, cavernous holes where pasture and road should be. That goes to the emotional impact that this is having on businesses. But there's another impact that was alluded to this morning actually. That is about the consequences.

This community was not entitled to small business support for people who were not directly affected by floodwaters. If you actually flooded, you were eligible for the State Government small business support that is available. What you're not eligible for is the special package for businesses indirectly affected—businesses that couldn't operate because they couldn't get across the river, businesses that have no customers because their customers had been flooded. That relates to people like a butcher I spoke to. The ski caravan parks don't have customers anymore, their businesses are closed, so he's lost all of his weekend business. The retailers have been looking at pretty dead streets. During the flood, dead for a couple of weeks. Now it hasn't come back. They are denied assistance.

What really galls them is that they're in New South Wales and other New South Wales residents are entitled to assistance with the same set of circumstances. They're asking, "Why is one group of people in New South Wales who've suffered a 40 per cent drop in their turnover not entitled to the same support that people in another part of New South Wales who've suffered 40 per cent of their turnover get?" For the Hawkesbury people, there's a question amongst our small businesses about that inconsistency. They've also raised with me the slowness of processing the small business support for those who were flooded. We drove past a business called Tractor 828 on the tour this morning. That business waited several months for their small business funding to come through. He was flooded. He was entitled. But it took a really long time. That from a cash flow perspective has been appalling.

I want to touch on the individual impact. The main thing I want to talk about is housing. We appreciate the terrible demand and need for housing up north. But, equally, there are people here who don't have a home to live in. One of the big gaps, and unfortunately neither Resilience NSW nor any other agency has been able to solve this, is to provide temporary housing for people to have on their properties. You saw the large acreage that many people who were flooded have. They want to be back on their property; it's a perfectly reasonable thing to be asking a government to support them with—to be able to have a temporary dwelling on their land so they can

do the repairs to their home, making it habitable, but also be able to be on their land. That's been denied people here. They do not have access to support to do that.

The second part of housing is that I'm receiving emails now from people telling me that they are being given advice that their emergency accommodation is coming to an end, and they have not been able to find another rental property. In one case in particular, a lady called Natasha tells me that she's only got a couple of weeks to get out of her hotel accommodation that she's been in—not through choice, but because that's all there is. Her original rental property has not even been assessed properly for repairs, so she has no time line on when she's going to be able to go back to her original rental home. She has to find something, and there is nothing in this area. We are absolutely chockers in terms of rentals. Homes are full; there's nowhere to go. That's some of the scale of it.

The biggest single failure by the State Government has been to resolve the riverbank destruction that has occurred. The Committee saw a glimpse of it in Cornwallis, but all along the Hawkesbury River there are giant horseshoe-shaped gouges out of the river on people's land. They want to fix it. They want guidance on how to do it, and that has not been provided to them by any New South Wales government agency. To me, that is the biggest failure we face. Had that been done post-2021 floods, we would have been in a much better situation and more prepared for when the 2022 ones hit. Unfortunately, we're looking at a lot more damage, a lot more heartbreak and a lot more cost because of the failures to address that issue. I'll leave it there, although there are probably 10 other things I'll happily contribute as we go through.

Ms ROBYN PRESTON: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Committee, for the opportunity to speak today. After three years of floods, we had the Black Summer bushfires in 2019-20 and a drought and the COVID-19 pandemic. The Hawkesbury community is actually exhausted, and there is still much work to be done as we recover from this year's floods. Whilst the water has subsided, it hasn't flowed away. It sits in ponds that were once fields of grass and bushland. Mould abounds in homes, businesses and schools, a legacy of the dampness and moisture that still prevails. Colo High School actually shut down for a time because the mould was rampant there, and the teachers again had to go into the work-from-home and teach-from-home mode there.

I know we live in a flood plain; that's a given. In the conversations that you had with some of our locals today, they understand that as well. Those that were new to Hawkesbury had never seen the river misbehave in the way it did. They were anxious at last year's floods, and the collapse of Bells Line of Road in 2021 exacerbated their anxiety. Their response to the floods this year was different. People prepared; they evacuated well in advance. They made plans to stay at friends' and family's places on higher ground or they relocated close to their workplace. The evacuation centres only had a few locals sleeping there. I would go there every day—Susan, I know you were one to go there as well—and it was different to last year. People thought they didn't want to spend overnight in an evacuation centre, even though there were provisions for them, so they took their animals to safer places and found friends that would take them in. The community does that; Hawkesbury does that. We welcome our locals and look after them.

Not one life was lost this year in Hawkesbury, and charities worked out a system with the SES. We had Mountain of Joy and we had Hawkesbury Helping Hands making food hampers and provisions for people who were stranded and isolated, and we had a system in place where we were able to dispatch food hampers and medical needs via the SES and our volunteers packing those. A caravan park that I visited, anticipating the worst, moved 50 boats and 120 caravans to high ground and saved all of them, because they'd been through this. We had a dress rehearsal twice before, so this time around we saw the warning signs and managed that.

The new Windsor Bridge recovered quickly after the river peaked at 13.8 metres on 9 March this year, although approaching roads were flood prone. I must compliment the way the New South Wales Government conducted clean-ups of household waste. There was support by the NSW SES and additional support on the ground from the RFS, the Police Force, Fire and Rescue NSW, Surf Life Saving, Marine Rescue, Volunteer Rescue Association, NSW Ambulance, St John Ambulance and countless members of the community who just rolled their sleeves up and got in and helped. I know as I walked around Cox Street, James, Mileham and the South Windsor areas that hadn't experienced this before, I watched them as they were so grateful for the support. Truckloads of volunteers and Fire and Rescue from out of area came into Hawkesbury, and they were there for them.

We had elderly folk who were, with their families, putting mattresses out there. All their possessions were out there. The one thing we didn't want was for it to sit there for days as a reminder of what they had lost. That quick thinking by the Government and the skip bins that were put out there was probably one of the things that was best managed in the floods. I've had no-one come to me to say that they were left behind. In fact, we had bins coming and going even around where the turf farmers were. We were able to help them there. I think that was a really good feature of the recovery.

My recommendations for the Committee to consider are, firstly, the riverbank restoration needs immediate action. Susan, I know you and I are both on the same page with this. Property owners want to be able to complete the works. They're not asking for a lot of government support in this way; they're asking for the ability to cut through the red tape. I know that was something that was focused on in the last floods. I think we have been slow to appoint compliance officers that were going to work with the council to cut through that red tape, to advise them on how they could restore those banks and to let the landowners go in and do it. I encourage that to be supported going forward, because they're champing at the bit to do that. They can't leave these riverbanks gouged the way they are now.

I recommend more public works support for Hawkesbury City Council to resolve the massive infrastructure repairs. I think at last count, Mr Mayor, there was around \$67 million worth of broken infrastructure. That's not normal infrastructure programs that are in the Hawkesbury. We saw today Greens Road and we toured Pitt Town Bottoms Road, Cornwallis—you saw the devastation there—and River Road on the other side, with The Hills Shire Council, and the damage that has done to the banks there. That needs to be brought up today as well. Currently, Hawkesbury City Council and The Hills Shire Council are struggling to complete these repairs with current staffing levels and are falling behind with other scheduled works. The potholes are enormous in the area. Trucks continue to move up and down the area. Turf farmers in Pitt Town Bottoms Road and Cornwallis Road—all those areas where you've got massive movements of trucks that are only trying to make a living with their businesses—are gouging out the roads. They're local roads, they're council roads, but trying to keep up the pace of the repairs is almost impossible for the local council.

Telecommunications need to be improved in remote areas such as St Albans and Lower Macdonald. A telecommunications tower or satellite phones must be provided as part of an early warning system. The Bureau of Meteorology needs to have water level gauges in the Macdonald Valley for accuracy in establishing when to evacuate, instead of the locals looking at Facebook pages from people that are giving them a hint of where the water's up to in their area. Also, I'd like to recommend establishing an SES kiosk in Macdonald Valley-St Albans territory. Train volunteers to operate and maintain an SES boat and have them service the needs of the local community, where the boat stays in their area. They become an island. They become trapped when the waters come in. So if you've got a local volunteer SES group that could be on guard and on hand and have those resources, they can move the medicines and the food around in their immediate area without having to wait for the SES to come forward from their headquarters, which is at least 30 minutes away by boat.

The Insurance Council of Australia should be invited to establish an affordable home or business insurance policy that covers a flat amount of, say, \$50,000 for a clean-up and rehabilitation of a site. Currently, premiums cost around \$20,000 a year to insure your home. But the homeowners in particular are saying to me that they don't want that, they can't afford that. They get that they live in a flood plain. But if they were to pay a reasonable premium that would give them \$50,000 to clean up their property after a flood, they would be really willing to pay those premiums. I would like this Committee to look at talking to the Insurance Council of Australia to see if there is buy-in there. The evacuation route at Pitt Town—we've looked at that today—needs to be upgraded. I won't talk further to that because you've been on the tour.

The drainage system needs an overhaul. Drains need to work, whether on Crown land, council land or private property. I'm pleased that Hawkesbury City Council is in the middle of conducting an audit of the drains. I welcome that. But once this is complete, funding needs to be available to clear unblocked drains and relocate problematic drains. There are people on their properties who have fixed their drains and—guess what?—it flows onto the next person's. There's no-one coordinating those drains on private, public or Crown lands. There's no-one coordinating that as such. I know council is making an effort to report back on where these drains are, where they are problematic. You've seen what happens when drains aren't maintained. We have very old drainage systems in the Hawkesbury.

The other thing I want to talk about—I know I'm quick for time. I'm thinking we should be looking at a levy for any new developments that have an impact on the Hawkesbury Valley. In those new developments, a levy would be placed per property if it was a subdivision. That levy would then go towards a fund that maintains and upkeeps the drainage systems that are flowing into the Hawkesbury Valley that no-one is taking responsibility for. No-one is cleaning out these drains. So I really think that's an important thing that needs to be looked at and perhaps funded in that regard. The other thing is—I'll just say it—raise the Warragamba Dam wall.

PATRICK CONOLLY: I'd like to start by, obviously, thanking you for the opportunity to be here and talk to the inquiry today. I'll try to skip through all the figures that you've already heard now from Ms Templeman and Ms Preston. I'll start by saying that as a result of the experience we've had, unfortunately, we've had the opportunity to learn a lot of lessons. We've developed a lot of stakeholder relationships over the past few years. My view, first and foremost—before I go into some of our learnings—would be that the various emergency services, support agencies and council were all in a very strong position to deal with the flood in 2022.

Operationally, in the first instance, it worked quite well. An EOC was stood up, agencies worked well together and an effective crisis response was provided. I want to start by acknowledging, therefore, the excellent work of the agencies but also Hawkesbury City Council staff. I think it's an example of why we need a locally led response by people who know the area, because it works very well.

Having said that, there are always learnings we can take from any of these events. I just want to go through a few of those now. I think there is a need to enhance the capability and the capacity, importantly, of State agencies such as public works—PWA. We experienced resources reallocated away from the Hawkesbury as these agencies balanced competing demands. We understood that at the time. What was being dealt with on the North Coast was unbelievable and we understood why that happened, given the constraints. However, we think that needs to be addressed as part of the aftermath: that the capacity of those organisations needs to be increased. I'll just touch briefly on Cornwallis, as the example that has been raised today. Cornwallis—we engaged PWA to be our lead on that immediately after the flood crisis was over. We understood that, yes, it's a council asset—those drains—but council is not set up to deal with infrastructure failings of that size and scale. It's not our expertise; it's not what we're staffed for. We recognised that immediately and put our hands up for help. We engaged PWA. PWA is doing a great job but it has been a slow process. That's certainly what the community is feeling at the moment.

As you heard from Ms Preston, we've had about \$60 million worth of asset damage. Council's normal capital works program that we're staffed to deliver is about \$25 million to \$30 million. That's our business as usual. We've still had our business-as-usual capital works to deliver for the past two years as well as delivering, somehow, an extra \$60 million of capital works. That, to me, is not a sustainable model: that if a disaster happens, a local government just has to deal with that. There needs to be some more capacity in our State agencies to be able to pick up the burden when that sort of thing happens.

I will also just touch on the riverbank restoration, which was a major issue after the March 2021 flood. I'm sure it will shortly be a major issue for us again. It's true that the New South Wales Government has funded caseworkers through LLS. That was a very slow process. I think the recruitment took almost a year, but they're on the ground now. However, from my perspective, that's a very small part of the problem. Having caseworkers to help applicants through the red tape is great, and they do need that because, again, council's dealing with many, many more DAs than we are staffed for as a result of this crisis. However, what was really needed and what was spoken about at the time was a streamlined process and, probably—I'm not an expert but in my view—a change of legislation that enables people not to have to go through and tick every single box that normally has to be ticked.

We were getting DAs in at council and we're following the law, and we're asking for 15 reports to go and restore the riverbank at a cost that might be three or four times the cost of actually doing the work. There's a cost; there's a time. It just means that what we have experienced—and I think most people in our community know this—is that a few people have tried to do it the right way and everybody else has just done whatever they wanted because it was too hard to come and do it the right way and talk to us. So we get a poor environmental outcome; we get a poor community outcome. Nobody's winning. Whereas if there had been an immediate response—as was indicated at the start, to have a streamlined approach and potentially to have some change in the planning legislation to allow for that—we could have got a much better outcome there. Unfortunately, we have a second chance at that now. So I would urge the inquiry to look at that.

We also note that, despite a number of requests from the LEOCON, SES Metro denied requests for a liaison officer to be based in the local EOC to manage communications between the EOC and the SES headquarters. It was not until the last days of the EOC's operation that we received representation from SES Metro at the EOC as part of the rapid damage assessments. Our view is that this placed an undue burden on the local commander of the EOC. Following the 2020 and 2021 flood emergencies and the bushfires as well, council employed a dedicated resilience and emergency management coordinator at the start of this year in January. That was a position that we decided we just had to fund. There is no funding for that position. But we are an at-risk council. Our experience during this crisis is that that was invaluable: to have somebody who was expertly trained, knew our systems and knew all our key people, who we could base at the EOC, which in the past would have been the role of the director or the general manager of council. It meant that all those senior council staff were still able to be at council and in the community to deliver an effective response. We knew we had an expert representing us at the EOC. We think that that is a model that should be replicated.

The costs of emergency management and resilience planning are currently being borne by ratepayers. Given our experiences, where our community, we think, was better prepared, informed and experienced as a result of having that position, council suggests that either government funding should be provided to support high-risk councils or, as we've already requested—and so far not had any luck—councils be given the opportunity to raise a special charge on their ratepayers to cover this expense. Council did put in a request to the local government

Minister last year that we should be able to charge a \$15 levy per property to be able to fund emergency management, given the risks that we face from both fire and flood. That was denied. We were told to go through IPART and seek an SRV. We think that's an issue to be looked at.

Loss of communications is an important and ongoing challenge for our community during emergency events, especially in the Macdonald and Colo valleys and surrounding areas. In terms of communication to the community during the emergency, at times there was confusion also over evacuation orders. We would welcome improvements to these, including mapping and the timing of the orders being issued. We did note that often evacuation orders were issued and they were time-stamped about 45 minutes before the community saw them. They don't have maps on them, so they were quite confusing for people. Because they also don't seem to have any local input sometimes—I'm sure they're technically correct—they're using language, suburb names sometimes, that are just not familiar to local people. They cause panic and cause the wrong people to evacuate or people to not understand that they're in that right area. It would seem that that's a responsibility that's now been taken by metro. But if it could be kept local, or at least have some local eyes over it, we could probably get a better outcome.

I also note that community recovery does not appear within the scope of the inquiry. But I did want to note the considerable work for council that we still have to do, in terms of community infrastructure recovery following, obviously, significant back-to-back flood events. We have opened recovery centres following events, which are sort of a one-stop-shop model for people who have been displaced or otherwise impacted by floods. They can come and talk to council, and talk to all of the other services in one place. That is a good model. We are now moving to an outreach model. Unfortunately, we know that we still have over 250 families in temporary accommodation and many more residents who are yet to access support.

Moving forward, we would suggest that Resilience NSW needs to prepare detailed recovery plans as a matter of priority. In the event of a more significant flood event, the recovery centres that we have at South Windsor and Wisemans Ferry are very unlikely to be fit for purpose. Another couple of metres of water and we are in real trouble in terms of where we can do any of this stuff. So we need to have somebody doing the planning of what happens in a larger event. Finally, whilst flood mitigation is not specifically mentioned in the terms of reference, the delays to the Warragamba dam raising project need to be mentioned, given the very significant impact the project will have on future events. Both the additional evacuation time and the lower flood peaks provided by the raised wall would drastically reduce the impact of events like these on our community, and the huge financial impost on taxpayers and ratepayers that follows them. It is hard for us to understand how the project has taken as long as it has so far to be considered, and I would urge the New South Wales Government to get on with the job and protect our community.

The CHAIR: I will start off with the very first question. This afternoon we visited Cornwallis Road and we met four local farmers, Emmanuel and Charlie Saliba. They are at their wit's end. I was born in North America. That is a bloody grand canyon in Sydney. I can tell you that if we had such erosion and such destruction on the scale of that in Sydney's east or Sydney's north shore, the State Government would have stepped in and provided assistance by now. Ms Templeman, do you think there is a role for the State Government because of the massive destruction that has occurred on Cornwallis Road? It's a grand canyon.

SUSAN TEMPLEMAN: It is extraordinary to me that the State Government has not stepped in sooner when recognising the scale of it. The lack of urgency in 2021 led us to where we are. But right now, you look at that grand canyon; it has changed the course of the river. It cannot be allowed to have a measured approach. It needs an urgent approach to it. I recognise that council has plans in place. My questions would be: What more can be done? How quickly can it be done? It is an emergency for these people, so it is the sense of urgency and emergency that are missing.

The CHAIR: Mr Mayor, would you agree that road damage, potholes and Cornwallis Road are the major issues that are pressing the council at the moment, and the damage bill is beyond what you can stump up?

PATRICK CONOLLY: There are many more issues than that, unfortunately, so I do not know that I would necessarily agree with that statement.

The CHAIR: Comment on the roads issue, then.

PATRICK CONOLLY: They certainly are major issues we are facing. A lot of this is funded through disaster recovery fund arrangements, so it is not so much about a damage bill for council; it is about having the capacity to deliver. We have recently been granted additional funding on a temporary basis for asset repair, so we are now going to have a temporary asset repair team. That is something new, however.

The CHAIR: Okay. You have been down to Cornwallis Road, haven't you?

PATRICK CONOLLY: Yes.

The CHAIR: That is not a pothole. That is a grand canyon in the middle of Sydney. This is Sydney. It is major destruction. Why are you not onto the State Government and saying, "This is beyond our capability?" This is major erosion. It is changing the course of the river. When we were there, we were warned not to go too close to the edge because it may, in fact, snap off. Heaven forbid, as more rains come, there will be more erosion. Can you understand why those farmers are so worried? They have seen their land values drop. They have seen their properties wash away. Can you see why they are upset?

PATRICK CONOLLY: Of course. Sorry, I might not have been clear earlier in my answer. PWA is a State Government agency. Immediately after the flood, we engaged PWA to look after that for us. It is being overseen by council as a council process, but we did put our hand up immediately after the flood and said, "This is beyond us and we need the State Government to step in," which they did. However, I agree with you that, given the urgency of the situation, it does not seem like anybody has the authority to step in and override all the approvals required, and get it done as quickly as it needs to be.

The CHAIR: But don't you admit that it is costly and dangerous?

PATRICK CONOLLY: Yes, absolutely.

The CHAIR: In your opening statement, you made reference to Resilience NSW needing to detail community recovery. We heard damning evidence on the North Coast about Resilience NSW not stepping up, not being there, and community members having to support each other rather than relying on Resilience NSW. What did you mean by saying that they needed to detail a community recovery plan?

PATRICK CONOLLY: Our experience of that during the time of crisis was quite different. I cannot speak to what happened anywhere else. In the Hawkesbury, like I said, the crisis response was excellent. Everything went as well as it could have from an immediate crisis response. We had recovery centres that stepped up immediately afterwards and we learned from 2021, so community recovery here went quite well. I guess the point we are making is that if we had been in a slightly different situation—if we had had more floodwater and the community centres and locations we were using for community recovery hubs had not been available—there really is no planning on what comes next.

SUSAN TEMPLEMAN: Chair, could I add a point about Resilience? I think we have all experienced incredible people on the ground working with Resilience NSW. We had the advantage that they had done it before. They had done it for fires—some of them. Many of them had done it for floods, so they were back for a second time. Our experience was that the recovery centres were able to be operational fast, but the people within them are very constrained by what is available in terms of support. The housing people are constrained. The Service NSW people are constrained. I had people say to me, "I went to the recovery centre and they were very nice, but there's nothing they could do to help me." When issues like mould in public housing are raised, that is not something that the recovery centre has capacity to support. I think we all acknowledge that the people we had on the ground in the recovery centres and the Resilience NSW people at a local level have been doing the best they possibly can with the resources and within the constraints that we have, and I think that is worth recognising. But, hey, that is the advantage of this being the third time in two years.

The Hon. ROD ROBERTS: I will direct my question to you, Ms Preston, and we will go back to Cornwallis Road as the example. We all toured there today. We saw the physical devastation. We heard from the residents down there about the mental devastation they have suffered, but there is also the economic devastation. They cannot generate income from their properties. They have had to let staff go. They are not spending money back in the community, so it has a snowballing effect. We have heard from Mayor Conolly, and it is quite obvious that this is above the capacity, at the moment, of the council to do it. He said that Public Works has been engaged. Do you think somebody in government should be rattling the chain a bit harder at Public Works to get some urgency happening down here?

Ms ROBYN PRESTON: I tend to agree with you, and the landowners would agree with that as well. The fact that Public Works is working with council—tick that box. But there needs to be more of a sense of urgency. The devastation on that side is extraordinary, so I think there needs to be an opportunity for government to have in place a team like we did with the bushfires. When the bushfires came to Hawkesbury, they changed the legislation. They allowed people to live on their land in temporary accommodation for—I think it was up to two years. Is that right, Mr Mayor? I am pretty sure it was. They could put containers on there as well. We need that to happen for people to be able to get back on their land now—with the floods—but this is not getting back on the land. The land is gone. There is nothing left. It is such a catastrophic situation.

I would like to think there could be a strike force team in the State Government that could go around and oversight major infrastructure repairs like this. We do not have that yet. I would think that could be a recommendation going forward from the Committee to work with councils but to pretty well say, "Look, we're

going to take this. We'll do this job." What you have is a list of preferred contractors that work with the State Government on big projects. Why doesn't this come into that category as well? Broaden that category and have the team able to go out and start straightaway.

The other thing is, council are busy doing potholes. Even their staff for that, you can't keep up with the demand for that in the ordinary council road areas. Clearly that backlog, I don't see that clearing for years. I don't know how you're going to do that. That is another part of this holistic approach that the State Government could do in lending that support on the local roads as well. I know we look after State roads and Cornwallis is a local road, but it's massively damaged. Let's have a team of experts come in at that level, take charge and get the contractors in that they know are proven contractors to handle this scope of work.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: I would like to talk donation management, just briefly. We've talked about the experience you've had here over several different events. You're very close to the bulk of where donations come from, in Sydney. Given the fact donations can do damage in one of these sorts of events, how have we learnt that donation management process? What have we seen? How have we got better over these different events?

SUSAN TEMPLEMAN: I'll start there, if I may. The Givit platform has been a terrific platform for people to be using, if they know how to use it. It has avoided the problems we saw in 2021 where people ended the recovery period, if you'd like to call it that, with a warehouse full of stuff that didn't have a home to go to. I think there is capacity for more work on this because a lot of people have not understood how to reach out through Givit to access support. This is a community that is more used to giving than receiving, and there are people who refused to accept anything in 2021 and it has taken a second flood a year later for them to recognise that it is okay to ask for help. I think we've seen improvements from 2021 to 2022, with a greater channelling through Givit and connecting in with really good community groups like Peppercorn and Hawkesbury's Helping Hands to be able to channel that support where it is. One gap I think we really have is about a better way of coordinating the offers of human help, where people and organisations wanted to go direct to a community rather than through a platform. There is some more work to do there.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Mayor Conolly, I just wanted to ask about your resilience officer. When the recent event happened, was the resilience officer a go-to person? Was the resilience officer somebody who worked with Resilience NSW? What was the benefit of having a resilience officer already? Could you just touch on those points briefly?

PATRICK CONOLLY: Sure. The resilience officer was based at the EOC, the emergency operations centre. We effectively were there almost 24/7 and that officer was there for most of that, to be honest, while the crisis, the event was there. The benefit of that was, that was an officer who is highly experienced in disaster management and very familiar with council's plans and what has to happen in what order. The additional benefit that we saw compared to previous floods is that because we are a small organisation, if you take a director or the GM out of council for a day to go and see the EOC it makes a huge difference to the organisation. But I might ask Liz Richardson to elaborate on that.

ELIZABETH RICHARDSON: Thank you very much. All councils in New South Wales are required to provide local emergency management officers. This role, which we employed and commenced with us in January 2022, fulfilled our LEMO role. We were very fortunate in our recruitment to have obtained a very experienced individual in multiple tiers of emergency management. As the Mayor has indicated, what that allowed us to do was to have a dedicated, experienced resource in the emergency operations centre working with our other staff, but it allowed our other senior staff the capacity to undertake all the other operational challenges that we have in times of emergency around opening and closing roads, managing our sewage treatment plants and all of those sorts of challenges. If our other senior staff are sitting in the emergency operations centre, we just don't have the legs on the ground to be able to manage.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Just to follow up on that briefly, does that person also assist council with developing plans in between crises, et cetera?

ELIZABETH RICHARDSON: Yes, absolutely. Council is in its final stages of preparing its resilience strategy and its resilience plans. That will be a big piece of work for us over the next six months.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Mr Mayor, we toured the evacuation route from Pitt Town this morning. It's a pretty rickety old road. Clearly it failed during these floods. I was very concerned that no-one seems to know who has the key to even opening that road along the edge of the national park there. What work has council done on identifying those evacuation routes? What support, if any, are you getting from State Government to do those immediately? It seems to me that some of this work is going to take a long time, but that just seemed to be an urgent, easy thing that could be dealt with. Can you just take us through that?

PATRICK CONOLLY: I might not be fully across the detail of the work required, but we have certainly gone and identified, as a priority, what needs to happen there in terms of fixing drainage issues, fixing road widths, road surfaces and lighting, in some instances. We've looked at what that would cost. Whilst it's not in our current operational plans, we've requested the money from the State Government.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Are you eligible for that under the disaster recovery—it sort of falls outside of that, doesn't it?

PATRICK CONOLLY: It's not from damage; it's just because it was identified during the emergency, unfortunately.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: How many evacuation routes like that do you have in the council area?

PATRICK CONOLLY: I wouldn't be able to answer that without—

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Could you maybe take it on notice for us?

PATRICK CONOLLY: Yes, we can take that on notice.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: I just think it is a really important issue, given we also obviously drove past places where there is a lot more development going in there. We saw "Eden's Future" or something, which currently is bush but looks like it's going to be a new development. With respect to population growth, are you able to tell us whether you have been able to match the population growth with the physical limitations on the evacuation routes?

PATRICK CONOLLY: At the moment we're essentially not able to do any further significant infill development east of the river on the basis of the SES's advice that it is not comfortable with the evacuation routes. At the moment there will be no further, essentially.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: And the SES has identified those routes as well, I'm aware. At a previous inquiry we've had discussions about that.

PATRICK CONOLLY: That's right. There have been a few goes at this, yes.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: I've got just one more question, about the issue of localisation and centralisation of the SES. It was a huge issue on the North Coast. In fact, I think to say that the Northern Rivers is upset about the loss of local knowledge would be an understatement. All of you have touched on that a little bit. What's your reflection on that? Is this a matter of the SES needing some more professional staff to support the volunteers? Is it working better with the volunteers? What is the answer to this? It's been heavily centralised to Wollongong and the North Coast were very unhappy about that. I'm keen to understand where you're at. I don't know who wants to go first with that.

PATRICK CONOLLY: Sure. I guess I would preface my answer by saying that I can identify the problems for you. I'm not a disaster management expert so I'm not going to have all the solutions; it is just my opinions. But I think it probably comes down to empowerment of the local commander. In Hawkesbury, we are very lucky to have an outstanding local SES commander and an outstanding SES unit. They know what they're doing. There are occasions where I'll be ringing the commander and saying, "Why hasn't this area been looked at yet?" and he would be saying to me, "I've told them. I'm waiting." Potentially, just empowering the local commanders to make decisions themselves, but I think also, when it comes to evacuation orders, quite simply literally just let them have a look at it before you issue it so you don't go and tell north Bligh Park to evacuate, for example, when you mean South Windsor, or what everyone locally knows as South Windsor. Those sorts of things happened from time to time and it just causes confusion in the community because it is not how we would refer to it.

Ms ROBYN PRESTON: I'd like to make a comment, if I may. In relation to Kevin Jones, who is our SES commander there in Hawkesbury, he is absolutely brilliant and the crew that he has are first class. He was my go-to person throughout this ordeal. I talked to him about—sometimes there are comments about, "We don't have an ambulance station or a police station over on that North Richmond side of the river." Even as early as two days ago I spoke to Fire and Rescue NSW and the other emergency groups. They said that they have a system in place. When it looks like the flood is going to cut off the bridge and people won't be able to get to either side, they deploy their machines and their people over to the other side.

They've got the hospital there, St John of God. There are ambulances that will be positioned over there and their teams. It is the same with Fire and Rescue. They have people that they will deploy over there. They actually live there as well. They have positions where they park their vehicles. They have a system in place there because they know the area so well and they're very familiar with the issues. I don't know if it's been different to Northern Rivers, but I'm very confident and comfortable in the way the SES are managing the situation and the

interaction they have with very good volunteers. I talked about Mountain of Joy and Hawkesbury's Helping Hands. There's a team of camaraderie amongst the emergency services platform and the volunteers that just get it happening. We are very fortunate in Hawkesbury to have that.

SUSAN TEMPLEMAN: If I may pick up on some of those points, there is a highly respected SES team. Kevin Jones has a lot of local knowledge and it did seem that that was absolutely being listened to. In terms of this issue of lack of services across the river, you asked about growing populations and that's where the population is growing. I wouldn't have the figures but council may be able to provide them of the projected growth across the river—west of the river. In 2021 not only did the bridges close but the roads all closed as well. There was total isolation. The SES was needing to take people across the river by boats. There was a massive flotilla happening and people were taken out by helicopter to seek medical care when they needed it.

That created the issue of a food shortage. We needed to literally ferry food across to the supermarket, not charity food but to get supplies across because this had not ever been contemplated. So the fragility of Bells Line of Road—which remains fragile and has not appeared to have a lot of resilience building done on it; it's had repairs but it doesn't appear to be more resilient—is a single point of failure in a flood when our other roads and bridges are closed. I think there is a need for the State Government to be looking at what services need to be there, like medical or fire. What is the plan? There is no plan. The plan was that you call the SES and you get a doctor. But if you need to, you get helicoptered out. There was also very poor communication about that for the community.

There is a lot of work to be done for the population on that side of the river to feel confident in a flood where they don't expect to be flooded but they know they could well be isolated. The other issue I raise just for the Committee to be aware of is the duplication of North Richmond Bridge. That is something that will be very key, with Commonwealth money involved in it, to make sure that whatever the plan is for that bridge—I am certainly keen to see that there is some additional flood resilience in the bridge that is put in there. We are all aware of the failure of that for the Windsor Bridge plan.

PATRICK CONOLLY: Could I very briefly say something?

The CHAIR: Yes, very briefly. I am mindful of time.

PATRICK CONOLLY: I just wanted to say that I think that was probably remiss of me not to mention the same thing that Ms Templeman just mentioned. When you asked about evacuation routes, mine didn't go to Bells Line of Road. But absolutely that needs to be a priority. That needs to be looked at and, similarly with the North Richmond Bridge, it is key to all of this.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: I have a few short questions so I am hoping they will have short answers. Ms Templeman, in relation to residents wanting temporary accommodation on their properties, which you have raised, it is a big issue on the North Coast. When it's not provided, people are living in inferior conditions, like tents. Winter is coming so there is a lot of anxiety about that. Resilience have taken the view that they don't want to put temporary accommodation on land that has flooded. I want to ask you to comment on that. I know our MPs are wishing for more flexibility up there, but I wondered what your thoughts were.

SUSAN TEMPLEMAN: Landowners in the Hawkesbury know their land. They care about their land and they want to restore it as quickly as they can. They also want a sense of home for their families. An agency might decide that's not what they want, but provided that measures have been taken to ensure that any contamination is dealt with, I can't see any reason why it isn't a sensible thing to do. The last thing we want is houses that are empty, land that's abandoned and people having to travel very long distances to care for their home.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: How many homes were flooded?

PATRICK CONOLLY: I don't have those numbers in front of me but I believe Ms Templeton has got those.

SUSAN TEMPLEMAN: We've got 627 damaged and eight destroyed.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Do you have a costing on the repair of Cornwallis Road?

PATRICK CONOLLY: We do have indicative costings on stage one. It is around the \$10 million mark.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: What does stage one get us?

PATRICK CONOLLY: Stage one gets us immediate protection. That's not actually the road itself; that's just the riverbank being restored so that the land doesn't become inundated with a minor rise in the river.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Do you know the cost of restoring the road?

PATRICK CONOLLY: We haven't actually designed stage two. That is why we split it into two stages. We recognise the urgency of the situation. The first focus is to immediately restore protection from the river and then the second stage will be to design the best road and drain.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: The suggestion is that it's beyond the capacity of council. I can see that financial capacity, but what about engineering capacity?

PATRICK CONOLLY: It is beyond our engineering capacity.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: You have a \$1.6 million storm levy. Is that correct?

PATRICK CONOLLY: Stormwater levy?

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Is there a stormwater levy on ratepayers?

PATRICK CONOLLY: Yes.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: How much is that?

PATRICK CONOLLY: I think that's \$25 per property.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: What does that yield?

PATRICK CONOLLY: Sorry, that would be 25,000 times by \$25. Something like that. I don't have that in front of me, sorry. I can take that on notice.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: But it's definitely not sufficient to do the work.

PATRICK CONOLLY: No. Financially, this will all covered by the DRFA.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: I have one final question. Sydney Water operates Warragamba Dam. Given that the drainage system here is so impacted dealing with the outcomes of the management of Warragamba Dam, shouldn't Sydney Water be managing the drainage system here?

PATRICK CONOLLY: There are multiple drainage systems owned by different—some are privately owned and some are owned by the State agencies that manage the infrastructure associated with them. But, yes, I think what was being said and what you are indicating is that a coordinated approach would be far better.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: This seems like a hopeless situation to me that there are just not the resources there for it to be dealt with at a council level. I can't see any alternative. Given that the dam is being managed for the whole of the Sydney population, it would seem reasonable to me that the consequences of that management on Hawkesbury should be shared by all ratepayers.

PATRICK CONOLLY: We certainly have no problem with that at all. Obviously we are now planning for what our current situation is, though, and that's for us to deal with that and take the coordination role. But certainly we wouldn't be opposed to Sydney Water taking it, yes.

The CHAIR: We are out of time. Mr Mayor, you took one question on notice from Ms Cusack. Can you also provide to us on notice the cost of damage to roads in the most recent flood?

PATRICK CONOLLY: Yes.

The CHAIR: Thank you for your time and your statements.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

Ms ANGELA DYE, President, Hawkesbury City Chamber of Commerce, sworn and examined

Mr GRAHAM FITZPATRICK, Business Advisor, Western Sydney Business Centre, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: Ms Dye and Mr Fitzpatrick, there is provision for a short opening statement, if you wish to do so.

ANGELA DYE: Yes, I'd like to on behalf of the chamber. Firstly, for those who don't know, the Hawkesbury City Chamber of Commerce is a not-for-profit. Everyone who is associated with that is a volunteer. I'd like to say that in my discussions with business community and community groups and the general public, basically the opinion is that you cannot fix and access anything from afar. I believe each area needs its own team. The Hawkesbury needs, and would benefit from, a locally based process to help with the recovery and funding, working with local government, other service providers and community groups. Locally based means they know the lay of the land—they've been here a long time, they know how it works in the Hawkesbury and they're used to what happens, and they're also quite informed regarding the people, the businesses and the locations around the Hawkesbury.

The CHAIR: Mr Fitzpatrick, would you like to give a statement?

GRAHAM FITZPATRICK: Yes, I would. The role of the Western Sydney Business Centre and Business Connect—not just for this process, but for others like bushfires and the recent COVID disruption—was to provide free business advice on the level of, in this case, getting businesses back and started again, so getting back to business. It was through business planning, looking at costings, marketing and pivoting in new directions. That was our job, and we have done that quite successfully off the back of the bushfires. The amount of work that we did around Bilpin with a lot of the fruit growers out that way during the bushfires was—even last year during the flood process, I worked with a local cattle farmer down the back of Windsor who lost all her feed. In fact, if you drove around last year you would have seen bales of her feed pretty much all over the region. I helped her get new feedstock and that sort of stuff. That was the role that we have played up until now.

This year we found that we were left out of the process a little bit. The referrals that we would normally get from Resilience NSW and Service NSW seemed to dry up this time around. We were getting more referrals from business accountants and that sort of stuff than what we were through the whole program. We found this time around that the flood recovery centres seemed to be overstaffed in many cases. There were more agencies there on the couple of occasions that I toured than there were people needing help to the point where some of the service providers, like myself, couldn't get a seat or a table to be there for a certain period of time to be able to help people. This time around, instead of four or five centres, like last time, there were only really two centres, which we thought alienated a lot of businesses from other areas that couldn't get to those locations. Maybe a couple of vans might be a better idea next time, which can go out to Pitt Town and those sorts of areas rather than relying on people. Because a lot of these businesses were still mopping up but then would have to travel to a recovery centre to talk to someone.

Overall, the biggest thing for me this time around was the whole grant process. The eligibility criteria, the \$75,000—again, microbusinesses have been left out. They were not just left out from the bushfires, they were left out during COVID for a lot of funding opportunities, and they've been left out again this time for this current flood process, so the actual eligibility process. Then, I don't know whether it was knowledge or training, a lot of the business concierges in that eligibility process were lacking that too. The number of clients who were getting different stories each time they spoke to a different person was quite a thing, to the point where we actually became a counselling service rather than an assistance service to those businesses that were struggling through that application process.

The CHAIR: I would like to take up one of the items that you mentioned in your opening statement. You talked about Resilience NSW being overstaffed but not providing referrals to you. On the North Coast there was criticism that they were eight to five or nine to five. Did you investigate why they didn't give you referrals?

GRAHAM FITZPATRICK: I don't know. John Todd, who is our executive officer—John apologises for today; he is quite ill at the moment—may have been a bit better to answer that because I'm just one of the foot soldiers in terms of the cog in the wheel rather than being at that management level. Our understanding is our role was to go out there and assist with that general business advice. Everything else was to be referred to through Service NSW. My understanding of it was we were given a directive to not even get involved in discussions around grant eligibility and that sort of stuff. It was literally, "If you need a grant, go and talk to Service NSW."

The CHAIR: Can you take me to the grants process? There has been lots of criticism on the North Coast.

GRAHAM FITZPATRICK: I do have a five- or six-page email from a client that I received this morning who was aware that this was happening today.

The CHAIR: Are you able to provide that to us?

GRAHAM FITZPATRICK: I'm happy to provide it. It goes through, in depth, the dramas that she had—four or five different applications.

The CHAIR: If you don't mind picking out a couple of them that you think are very important and then tabling the document?

GRAHAM FITZPATRICK: Yes, absolutely. This is in light of the fact that the areas that I look after are Blacktown, the Blue Mountains, Penrith and the Hawkesbury. This client was on fringe of the Hawkesbury. She is on the border of the Hawkesbury and Blacktown. Initially Blacktown was left out of the flood recovery assistance scheme. She had to lobby Service NSW and Prue Car, MP, to get Blacktown included in a lot of the grant recovery to begin with. Her initial application for the \$15,000 was overturned and they wouldn't disclose the reason why that happened.

The CHAIR: So what happened?

GRAHAM FITZPATRICK: Second time around she applied based on the fact that there was a code within her ASIC registration that wasn't correct—so money again that she had to pay to her accountant to get that fixed. She finally got the first \$15,000 through. She was then told that she could apply for another \$15,000 in further funding. The problem with that was she had to give receipts for what that \$15,000 was spent on. She didn't have the money to begin with. What she had to do was get the \$20,000 home grant and she was using that money to buy \$15,000 worth of stuff to prove receipts. But then every time she spoke to someone at Service NSW it was either waiting on hold or it was different advice. That is just one business out of a number.

The CHAIR: What was her business?

GRAHAM FITZPATRICK: She runs a thoroughbred horse spelling yard. She grows feed for those and she provides feed. The other thing was there were arguments a lot of the time as to whether she was a primary producer, whether she was a small business or whether she ran a horse agistments business, which didn't qualify her for any funding at all.

The CHAIR: Do you find this typical of the grants process?

GRAHAM FITZPATRICK: In this case I think it was. Also, regarding the cattle farm that I mentioned earlier, I rang her straight after the floodwater started to subside to see what funding and what assistance I could give her. Her words were basically, "I'm still waiting on my funding from RAA last year; what is the point of doing anything this year?"

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Did you just say that horse agistment doesn't qualify as primary—

GRAHAM FITZPATRICK: One of the things—it's in here, I'll have to go through it—is because she was dealing with horses, she wasn't eligible and considered as a small business. She didn't fit with the primary producer aspects of the rural funding. That's the thing, there are a number of businesses that have fallen through the gaps with these various eligibility criteria.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: So agisting livestock doesn't qualify as primary production?

GRAHAM FITZPATRICK: That was my understanding in her circumstances, yes.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Wow. The definition of what is a "primary producer", as I understand it, is based on an ATO definition. Do you have any comment about that?

GRAHAM FITZPATRICK: I understand that the \$75,000 criteria was based on where GST kicks in, but it left a lot of businesses out that were under, or nowhere near that, but were still majorly impacted. That doesn't even take into account some of the indirect aspects of it as well. There was an asphalt company that because the ground is so wet the owner can't do any work and hasn't been able to do any work in the last six months. So a lot of the time it's just that. A cafe over the other side of the river from Wisemans Ferry, because the river was cut—that's her trade—none of the grants were around decreases in trade; it was all about damage to property and things that were lost.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Earlier Robyn Preston made a suggestion for funding in relation to businesses and people who can't get insurance: potentially a new product that looked at \$50,000 cover to assist with dealing with the flood rather than the actual building itself. Have you thought about that idea?

GRAHAM FITZPATRICK: No. I must admit, insurance is another one.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: On the basis that that might be obtainable insurance.

GRAHAM FITZPATRICK: Part of our role is to talk about clients' costs and business resilience and that sort of stuff, but because there were no referrals in the whole process we weren't in the position to even be able to have those conversations. Last year we spoke to Service NSW a number of times about giving us a list of businesses that were coming through the flood recovery centres that we could go and follow up, and my understanding is we never got that list. This time we didn't even go down that road because we were told that our function was to go and assist, and that everything was going through Service NSW.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: So what's changed between the two floods?

GRAHAM FITZPATRICK: I don't know. I say it again, being just one of the foot soldiers and an adviser, I don't know those higher conversations. But, in my understanding, I don't know. We found that we became counsellors a lot of the time. As an adviser—and we found this through COVID too—we were sitting at home, to a certain degree, and could have been utilised a lot better in terms of going out there and helping businesses with their grant applications instead of being told that it all had to go through Service NSW.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Do you think that there is a particularly vulnerable cohort in relation to making claims?

GRAHAM FITZPATRICK: I think the whole claim process is difficult. Even in terms of the way it's done, there's businesses and business people out there who aren't that tech savvy and don't know the difference between a PDF and an upload, and that sort of stuff. It just seems to me that the concierges were like, "This is the process," and if you couldn't fit to that process, "Sorry, we can't help you."

The CHAIR: Ms Dye, in your opening statement you said you wanted a locally based response. Can you explore that and explain to me what the deficiencies were that made you make that recommendation?

ANGELA DYE: Yes, only from the feedback of the businesses that we've spoken to and the general community that we've spoken to. They seemed to say comments along the lines of "Everyone that comes to help us doesn't live in this area and they don't understand the way this area actually works and the way that the floods and the fires and all the different disasters affect the Hawkesbury." It is very individual, as it is with other areas around New South Wales that it has happened to. Having a locally based group that has that knowledge, made up of our people who have been in the services that are required, would mean they basically have someone on their side that understands Cornwallis, for example. No-one understands the damage that's done there unless you live in the Hawkesbury and you've seen it how it was before. You get the opportunity to come here; the majority of people elsewhere don't.

The CHAIR: Are you familiar with Cornwallis Road?

ANGELA DYE: Yes, I've been in the Hawkesbury since '77.

The CHAIR: You've seen that this deterioration has occurred in the last two years?

ANGELA DYE: Yes. It's dreadful and nothing seems to make it better; nothing fixes it. The Hawkesbury will always flood. Regardless of the height of the dam, regardless of anything else, it will always flood. That's what the Hawkesbury is. However, we need to have people in place as well as processes in place that are going to make it better so that people in the area are not affected to the extent that they currently are.

The CHAIR: You would accept that because that road is in such a state—I'm sorry, it doesn't exist—

ANGELA DYE: That's right.

The CHAIR: —that, in fact, that adds a significant extra cost to you doing business activity in that area?

ANGELA DYE: Yes, correct.

The CHAIR: And also there is the state of the roads in the council area too that increases the cost of doing business in the community.

ANGELA DYE: It does; it increases the cost of doing business. It stops people from using those roads who would get to those particular businesses. This is what Graham has been saying. Here I've got from the Rural Financial Counselling Service that has set up a shop now in the Hawkesbury to help the farmers and all that—similar things that the previous panel, along with what Graham has been saying, is what's on here regarding that although the farmers know that they live on the flood plains, they still have to look at Cornwallis and look at the drainage and look at this because they just can't work. They just can't have their businesses functioning.

The CHAIR: What is the document that you're referring to?

ANGELA DYE: This is just an email that was sent to me when I spoke to the Rural Financial Counselling Service—

The CHAIR: What did they say?

ANGELA DYE: —because they deal with financially counselling people with grants and everything, primary producers, and they're on the land. Would you like me to read it?

The CHAIR: Yes, sure.

ANGELA DYE: It says, "Many of the farmers accept that flood is a real possibility given that many farm the rich soils of the flood plains along the river. They don't want to accept that as a solution that takes time, they want immediate work to commence and help minimise the impact for the next time." A lot of them are about "Yes, this has happened, we have to get through it but it is going to happen again so we need to make sure it's not as bad." The drainage pipes along Cornwallis Road are a perfect example. It has taken the council almost 12 months to repair them after the last flood and now they have a much bigger problem to deal with after years and years of floods and things not being fixed. They will put in a temporary solution; this is what they're telling us. It is going to be a temporary solution again, which is going to make it an even longer term before things get fixed.

The CHAIR: I know the mayor referred to a stage one and stage two, and stage one was just a stabilisation.

ANGELA DYE: Yes. The way that they're looking at it is it's always just a stabilisation. It's never "fix it, finish the fixing". The control of water flow in the Nepean-Hawkesbury is massive. Raising the dam wall, they've got a question mark there. Penrith Lakes was supposed to be a mitigation system, as was boring holes in sandstone walls of the Hawkesbury downstream for Sackville and Portland to help avoid the bottleneck situation that creates much of the flood devastation. There is a lack of communication with the farmers. Farmers are a breed of their own. They're very proud people and they don't want to accept help. They feel that they live on the land and they should be able to deal with it.

What they've listed here is some don't want help. "I'm a farmer. It's just part of farming." That is their attitude. Some believe they won't get help so they self-assess. "We wouldn't get the help anyway. We never do. We apply for the reason of ticking a box or not ticking a box or having GST or not having whatever." They get passed over. The primary producer grants of \$75,000 to repair and recover—they need assistance with those. Again, as it has been mentioned before, they don't use the technical stuff that a lot of people use. They get on there and they don't know where to go and they don't know what button to push. It goes the wrong way, they just shut it down again. They're constantly facing barriers.

The CHAIR: Mr Fitzpatrick, you nodded during the Cornwallis matter. Is there something you'd like to say?

GRAHAM FITZPATRICK: Yes, and I'm no expert in terms of the riverbank and all the rest of it but I was involved last year in a couple of business forums that were held at the sports club at Pitt Town for businesses to come and meet the various departments and agencies and that sort of stuff. The two nights that I was there the main consensus from the business owners, especially from the primary producer aspect, was people coming in there and talking about the riverbanks and that sort of stuff. There was a massive concern for that, and in fact I was actually a bit flabbergasted sometimes because a couple of times there I was sitting there going, "Does anybody want to actually talk about getting their business back on track?" but the emphasis was on that riverbank. I think that's part of the problem. What has happened on the river is primarily at people's top of mind and everything else just seems to be secondary. How do you actually assist businesses when that infrastructure of the roads, the drainage and that sort of stuff is so impacted?

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: I have a quick question, possibly for you, Ms Dye. From a chamber of commerce perspective, donations that get sent into the area from Sydney, say, versus when cash is donated for people to spend money in that area—I know through our drought support, for instance, it was a big deal to have the money spent in the town. From a chamber of commerce perspective, have you got a comment on that?

ANGELA DYE: I believe the community groups that are in the Hawkesbury are well versed in looking after those types of things and they really do live up to the task. All of our people who are volunteers, I don't believe there's anything better anywhere else. They accommodate those very well. When donations come in, they already know where it's going. They have already earmarked it because they've got their list of people, they've got their team out there talking to the community. The Hawkesbury City Chamber of Commerce actually has a welfare officer as part of a committee, and Rob has been so active in the community making sure that as things are happening like that, we already know where it's going to go and where it's needed. That's what has been happening.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: But from a business perspective, would you rather see the donations get made in cash spent in the local area or goods sent out from Sydney?

ANGELA DYE: I have not asked anyone else about this, but I would rather see it come in in cash and, again, we use hopefully locally put together processes along with all the other bodies in the area to make the money do the best it can do. If someone needs a wardrobe, that's fine. If someone needs clothing, that's fine. They're always there because the Hawkesbury is such a generous community. It just gives and gives and gives and gives. They are always there. Taking some of that away and making some of it cash would, I believe, benefit the whole community, business and otherwise, better.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Could you both comment on the general level of confidence of businesses in the area to continue investing in their businesses at the moment? What is the feeling like?

ANGELA DYE: Because we've been hit so many times so quickly, and if you include in there the COVID situation as well, the first tranche came in and certain businesses just fell. For whatever those reasons were, they fell, but a whole lot of them got back up again and they went, "Okay, brush yourself off. This is business; this is what happens." Off they went again, and then it hit again along with floods and along with bushfires. You have had a number of the business community in smaller businesses—one-man band, those types of ones, cafes at the side of the road, different entertainment function areas, all those sorts of things—throw their hands up and go, "We just can't pick ourselves up again. We just need to either be supported better or have the recovery work faster."

Sometimes it's the time frame that does it—the time frame and the constant "I have to answer some more questions", "I have to fill in another form", "I have to do this again", "It's a different person on the phone", "I don't have a case manager, so I'm telling my whole story again". They're reliving everything that has already happened over and over again. Then they just go, "You know what? I just can't do this any more. I just don't have the energy to get up." Businesses in the Hawkesbury are also supporting businesses in the Hawkesbury to do that, to be able to take another step and get up. That's how I've seen it anyway, from the chamber.

GRAHAM FITZPATRICK: I'm lucky to actually work across a number of different council areas—three council areas—where very much the business community look after their business communities. It is a credit to the chamber and the way the chamber facilitates that where they assist each other. That has been the main thing. I think the biggest thing is there is a huge level of frustration right through. I didn't mention this before, but there was \$1,000 that anybody in a flood-affected area could access. I know in areas like the Blacktown LGA people who were living in a block of flats in Rooty Hill got \$1,000, and these businesses that are struggling and dying in some cases in the Hawkesbury here can't get \$15,000 to replace a piece of equipment. That's the frustration, and their confidence is affected off the back of that frustration. As an adviser, I can only sit there and advise them on so much in terms of that frustration and that lack of confidence.

But I will say that one of the things that has blown me away is the resilience of business in western Sydney. They have been knocked around so much over the last three years, and many of them who pivoted in new directions have been absolutely amazing. It has been a privilege to work with a lot of those businesses. However, a lot of those smaller businesses, as Angela said, yes, are throwing their hands up or have shut down. That's why we've seen an increase in start-ups over the last two or three years because the place that they worked for before has either made them redundant or they have closed down and now they're looking at setting up their own business, just purely to have a source of income.

ANGELA DYE: Can I just add something as well? We have the other side of it as well. A lot of new business has risen out of the ashes. A lot of people have been very innovative, twisted their businesses around and changed tack and gone in different directions. They have done that with support of the organisations within the Hawkesbury and other business owners saying, "Why don't you look at this?" It has been really great to see that the businesses who have been around for a long time have been able to help the businesses who are struggling by giving them business ideas of how they could twist their business and put it in another direction so that it can start to earn them income again. These are business owners. Business owners have a mindset that this is what they want to be; they want to be business owners. To see all that happening within the chamber locally has just been really amazing.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: I want to ask a question about the massive gaping hole at Cornwallis that we saw today. Is there a sense from anyone on the ground that it's actually too big to fix? You would have to be realistic with flood after flood after flood and what is happening with the riverbank that it's just too massive to fix.

GRAHAM FITZPATRICK: I was taken down by a turf farmer last year originally to see it, because they back onto that. I was staggered with it then. A cattle farmer that I was also assisting backs onto that, and it

was at a point where she couldn't end use that back end of her paddocks for her cattle and that sort of stuff. That was last year. Now it's beyond—you said earlier, you just can't fathom the scale of it.

The CHAIR: It's the Grand Canyon.

GRAHAM FITZPATRICK: Yes, exactly right. We know that there is more weather on the way. What happens next?

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Exactly.

ANGELA DYE: I have the same opinion. You look at it and you just go, "Gosh, if I hadn't seen that, I wouldn't believe it."

GRAHAM FITZPATRICK: I've actually tried to describe it to people in other areas and that sort of stuff, and I just can't because the scale of it is just—

ANGELA DYE: You actually feel like you're making it up. You feel like you're really exaggerating how big it is.

The CHAIR: I know. When you walk down the bitumen, as you're walking slowly towards it, you confront a cliff in the middle of a road.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Can I get a sense of what Public Works has said to the local community about what's needed to fix it? Everybody is saying that Public Works is across it and aware of it, but it's delaying—I mean, I would be surprised if Public Works knows what to do with that massive Grand Canyon out there in the Hawkesbury.

ANGELA DYE: I think part of the problem is that no-one seems to want to go, "I want to take ownership of this." No-one seems to want to say, "You know what? It's going to take these five organisations to fix it, so guess what? We've all got to work together." It either belongs to someone or it doesn't belong to someone; the responsibility is this one or this one. They just keep chopping and changing. Depending on who it is you talk to will depend on who gets blamed for the lack of it or if it can be done or if it should be done. There is even that question, "Should it actually be done or should it not be done?"

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: One of the farmers we met suggested today, in terms of construction workers, we get some of the construction workers who are doing the Western Sydney Airport—put that on hold and get all those people out to that to try to restore the roads. What do you think about that kind of thing? Because where are they? Where are the construction workers?

ANGELA DYE: They're all at the airport, aren't they? Again, it comes into what's more important to the general. That little part of the Hawkesbury is important to the Hawkesbury.

The CHAIR: Ms Dye and Mr Fitzpatrick, 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 in western Sydney. Public forums are a relatively new innovation to the New South Wales Parliament, so please bear with us. Before we commence, I will make some brief statements about today's procedures for today's public forum. Speakers were asked to register in advance for today's forum. Those of you who have registered to speak will be called upon in turn. You have approximately five minutes to speak to the Committee. We will sound a warning bell at 3½ minutes so you will be aware that you need to wrap up and conclude your remarks. I stress that it is important to keep to time as best as possible so that we can have as many people address the Parliament and share their stories.

What you say today is being transcribed and streamed live to the Parliament's website and will be included as evidence to the inquiry. It is also important that I note again that while all participants are covered by parliamentary privilege, committee hearings and public forums are not intended to provide a forum for people to make adverse reflections about others under the protection of privilege. In that regard, 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 come today to share their story. It is important that the Committee hears the personal stories of those affected by the floods. It will help shape our report and formulate what we hope will be important recommendations to the Perrottet Government.

Mr CHARLIE SALIBA, before the Committee: I would just like to let everybody know that the washout that we got has been going on on our farms, sort of—this project has been going the last three years, and we haven't had much of a result out of it yet. We keep getting promised that something is going to be done, something is going to be done and then another two or three weeks, and it has been going on for three years. The damage that we got in our farm, we got two foot of silt in there. I wouldn't mind any of youse there would like to come down and have a look for yourselves because, when you see a photo of that, it doesn't look the same. We lost 90 per cent of our business. I had to put blokes off.

We can't carry on with our business until that bank's fixed, because we can spend \$1 million to get our farm back going again and three days' rain—we can lose everything again. Every time we talk to a council person or somebody, they say they can't make a decision. They say, "That person's not here today to make a decision for us." What compensation can we get? Council refuses us every time we say something. "Take us to the court"—that's our answer we get back from them. We're getting bad results all around the circle. It just keeps passing the buck from one person to another person. You might as well be in the circus, because that's the way it looks like to me it runs like. I'd like to see youse all come down there and have a look what actual damage it does to our properties, because look from a photo and that doesn't do any good. Thank you.

Mr PAUL SALIBA, before the Committee: Just want to basically say Parliament or the Government, basically, need to change their policy on Warragamba Dam. Basically, we need them to be able to release water for two or three weeks prior to them needing to do it for a flood. Once they release that water, the way that they're running at the moment, the volume just wrecks the banks and causes it to jump in spots. It's just wrecking the whole district—the veggie farmers, equestrian, turf, the cows. Basically, if they're able to manage it a bit better—they've got the sensors in the river. They can adjust the water so it's a manageable height—obviously, not at the moment, in the sense that there's an open hole. But generally they'd be able to manage the water. That way, it doesn't affect the farmers or the residents or anyone in their house. If they're allowed to release the water—if you understand what I mean.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: We do.

PAUL SALIBA: Also, I've read that, if they do build the wall, that water, they're going to release at the same time, which is going to keep us under for longer, which is just going to wreck everything again if they keep the water.

The CHAIR: Would you like to say anything about Cornwallis Road?

PAUL SALIBA: Yes. The road's non-existent.

The CHAIR: Thank you, gentlemen. If that concludes your remarks, thank you very much.

Mrs ROCHELLE MILLER, before the Committee: I'm a resident of Greens Road, Lower Portland, on the Hawkesbury River. I will try my best to list extensive issues in limited time. Our road was swept away in March '21 flood. Repairs had not begun before the March '22 flood, causing further damage. We have limited access. We are heavily financially impacted with the delay of access to our property. One end of Greens Road is impassable from flood damage. The other has tight hairpin bends not suitable for trailers or trucks. My community will be without water haulage delivery for two years due to heavy vehicle restrictions from road damage. RFS trucks will not have full access to my home or my neighbours. Emergency response is delayed by approximately

45 minutes. The 17-kilometre flood detour is not a road; it's a bushfire trail, Wheelbarrow Ridge Trail. Allocated repairs to Greens Road did not begin until after the '22 flood event.

We are very aware we live rurally, but what I have encountered, dealing with disaster relief, is a lack of problem-solving in a lot of process. When we cannot adapt the way we legislate and support disaster, you expose constituents to prolonged suffering. It will take time to repair the road properly; it is the handling of the process prior to workmen on site that is inexcusable. We have no other road while ours is in the river. The estimated repair time could have been drastically reduced if dealt with as a response to a flood disaster. Government levels have continually told us they cannot make our detour a roadworthy access. We are told National Parks and Wildlife govern the detour zone, grading cannot occur, the trail continually washed out, potholed. The majority of one-lane sections has limited vision.

After the Gaspers fire that threatened the same trail we are driving as a flood detour, bushfire trails across the State were surveyed by government to make access better. All levels of government will not maintain Wheelbarrow Ridge Trail for residents' safety on detour for two years after a flood event. It's just too bad. But two fire trucks can't even pass on the same section for the next fire event. You all have the power as the game changers to make rural communities less isolated from the services we are entitled to as citizens. If you cannot offer a guarantee to our safety on a road engineered to today's standards for road requirements, come up with other options. It is part of flood relief.

I am also snubbed, inquiring why we cannot utilise the river as a transit option while the road is being repaired. It would keep our families and elderly off the trail, reduce travel times, open tourism venues and relieve the personal costs during this prolonged period of time created by government, not a flood. Funding is denied by Resilience NSW for a water taxi. It does not fall in a certain category, because there is not enough children, not enough people in an isolated community. There might not be a huge amount of us. But, surely, flood recovery and relief includes all that are flood-affected. My daughter, eight at the time of the '21 flood, developed anxiety—sorry.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: It's all right.

ROCHELLE MILLER: Sorry. Kids get me every time. She developed anxiety, throwing up, travelling the bushfire trail, on the side of the road. She's a tough kid. She's never had carsickness. All the government levels have visited the site and spoke of doing everything we can and putting our requests in to the geotechs. Tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock. Still my children enduring the mental exhaustion of the detour and the lengthy travel times to school. I am exhausted, dealing with red tape.

Flood disaster response should include planning that reduces these prolonged repair times. All I've heard from government authorities are the reasons why they cannot work with policyholders—so many "whys" followed with answers of "not our area, not our job". My question is "Whose job is it?" Stop talking in circles. Governments should have procurements on tentative contracts to respond to rebuilding infrastructure such as roads. We are here, waiting months for decisions to be made by State Government, SES, Resilience NSW, who have the flood mapping for years. You all know what roads in the flood plain are going under in minor to major flood levels. You have them to evacuate people, to save lives. You know where that infrastructure is. Why does it matter if it's a council road or a State road? Don't all Hawkesbury drivers deserve safe, roadworthy roads after a flood? Why is the funding not coming from one area of control after a flood disaster?

The Telstra towers were out during the most dangerous of floodwaters. The power was off in Lower Portland for over a week. The most crucial of times to communicate, we had no reliable communication. Our satellites only cover so much without power. Yes, we invest in generated power and fuel. We individually plan. Where is the planning from large corporation and government to back up communication? It is a life-and-death necessity. People with no reception, needing life-saving medication, were uncontactable by community, inaccessible when valleys flooded with stormwater and river created their own islands. Diabetics could not obtain insulin, caught out as floodwaters that usually last a matter of days took a week to disappear, isolated with no phone service. SES headquarters were amazing, but medical supplies could not be collected or supplied the same way. If Telstra cannot supply communication coverage, isolated communities need satellite phones to coordinate relief. Much like defibrillator projects for response, these areas that cannot reach each other should be provided with the communication.

Claim processing can also be improved for those who legitimately deserve the service they undertook. I refer to the Northern Rivers now. My parents lived not far from Woodburn at the time of the '22 flood, needing medical assistance three times a week. Local Evans Head chemist Trevor Coonber was flooded out of access to his chemist when the rain bomb hit the Northern Rivers. With parts of the Pacific Highway flooded with water, Trevor took the initiative to hire a private helicopter to return to Evans Head on the morning of 2 March 2022. Knowing his life-saving medical scripts had to be filled for the isolated, he issued approximately 750 scripts that

day to community that had been flooded out of Broadwater, Woodburn and other areas—750 medications that saved lives. A claim for the expense of the helicopter that saw him attend to his crucial role in the community was directed to Resilience NSW, directly lodged on Trevor's behalf by local Federal member Kevin Hogan. Today, despite the Federal office follow-up, the claim has not been processed. Why does access to water transit for flood-affected and life-saving medical supply not fall under the Resilience support in New South Wales? Thank you for your time today.

Mr PETER RYAN, before the Committee: I represent the Pitt Town Progress Association. It has been working at Pitt Town since about 1891, and at present we have 300 members. Our main role is to advocate for the people of Pitt Town to all levels of government. We're non-political and we work for our people, and that's our only task—to get the best results from government. You have travelled to Pitt Town today, but it quickly becomes isolated by flooding, to a degree where if we need supplies from Windsor and that, we've got to go a long way round. That becomes very irritating, because people are away from their homes and they're away from their families. That is a real impost on the people.

We need, at Pitt Town, someone on the ground—a face, a person to take responsibility, someone who the people can work with. A couple of us did that unofficially, and we showed leadership. People would come to us and say, "We need sandbags", or we need this or we need that. But we really need someone and we need a community hub out there where these things can be kept all the time, like sandbags. When people needed sandbags, they had to come to Windsor. They're not going to take an hour to do that, so they did get some transported out there, and it wasn't enough. We need the facilities there where the people can go and do it themselves, but we need a face there. We need an SES or someone who is an authority to do it so that people can walk up and say, "What will happen? What is the flood doing?" so that they can actually see it face-to-face.

We've lost power; we've lost internet. Believe it or not, our mobile phone service is not good out there at the best of times. For some reason the tower faces the wrong way. Even though we can stand there and look at it, we cannot make a phone call. That's something where we need to know that the communications are set up for us. If we have a community hub, we can supply the sandbags. People can go in and get food from the Helping Hands and all that, because people out there won't actually put their hand up and say, "We're not doing real well". But if there's a place for them to go to and it is available, they will take up the opportunity to take it up.

Probably the single biggest item in Pitt Town when it comes to flooding—and we took you along it today—is the flood evacuation route. I've prepared a video of it when it was at its worst. I wasn't able to show you today, and I hope that it'll be distributed with you people. We need someone to take responsibility to deliver it, because today we are one day closer to the next big flood. To have it mishmashed around is not good enough. We need a road that's two lanes all the way, that's well drained, well marked and well maintained. Get rid of the trees. Make it so it actually will support the people when they are at their worst.

I've been through 20 floods in my lifetime. This last one was—now we have an extra 3,000 people. I have never seen the look of horror on people's faces. They were trying to go to school to pick up their children. The floodwater had cut the roads; they didn't know what to do. There were cars breaking down in the water because we couldn't get the flood emergency section opened. We finally did get it open, thanks to the chap from the Rural Fire Service, but that is a single-lane road. Then we had to have the large trucks coming through there. It broke the road up, and we were in a mess. Please think about these things; it's safety. We haven't lost a life yet. Please, let's not go down that track and lose a life just because we haven't supplied the proper infrastructure. I thank you very much for listening to me and putting up with me on the bus tour this morning.

The CHAIR: Mr Ryan, if you'd like to provide that video to the secretariat, it's part of our deliberation.

PETER RYAN: I will do that right now.

Mr IAN BURNS, before the Committee: Good afternoon, everybody. Thank you for the opportunity of me being able to come here and bore you with my story. I'm in a very, very lucky situation where I own and operate a tourist icon for Windsor. I bought *The Hawkesbury Paddlewheeler*. If you think of the Murray River and the *Emmylou* and things like that, that's what we've got on the Hawkesbury. It was originally in Lane Cove National Park, and in 2000 we brought it up to Windsor.

The last three to four years have been an absolute nightmare for every business, whether you're on the river, close to the river or in an area where we enjoy the river when it is normal. I'm lucky I've got an amazing lifestyle when the weather is fantastic, but come the times of floods, it's absolutely terrifying. My business is on the river. I'm not a building or something that can go underwater; I get washed away. In the last three years we've had three major floods that have absolutely decimated my business. In the first one we nearly lost our lives trying to rescue the boat to get off its mooring at Windsor near the bridge. There's videos of that everywhere. We ended up being washed down to Gronos Point, with no assistance from any emergency services or anything like that.

We were tied up on the side of the river at Gronos Farm and trying to stay alive as long as we could before we did get rescued. The first night we were there, tied up to the side of the river, people came onto the boat and vandalised it and caused thousands of dollars' worth of damage.

From that flood in 2020 we could not return to Windsor, because the infrastructure and the facility and the wharves and everything were down near Pittwater somewhere. We ended up down at Lower Portland. In March '21 we received another flood which ended up destroying everything and burying our mooring again, ending up in Wisemans Ferry, where we have been for over 14 months until this flood hit. I haven't been able to work since Valentine's Day 2021. I've been tied up on the side of the river. I went to the flood recovery centre that was set up in Wisemans Ferry, and it was an absolutely amazing place. The people were incredible; their help was outstanding. We received the 12 weeks of money coming in to try and support us when that happened last year, though I haven't been able to work this year, because the infrastructure for me to be able to work is still not in place to be able to pick up passengers.

I went to the recovery centre again at Wisemans Ferry this year, only to be told because I hadn't earned any money two weeks before this flood that I wasn't entitled to anything. That was through the Centrelink people. When I explained to them that I haven't worked since the last flood because I haven't been able to, they said, "Look, I'm terribly sorry, but you don't fit the criteria to be able to get any money". The biggest problem with our business is that we don't fit into the box of a business affected by flood. We float on the water and if we don't work, I don't get paid. I've had no money come into the business since 2021. The only thing I've survived on is having to sell my house to pay my bills and stay afloat.

I'd like to thank Susan Templeman. I know it's not nice to mention people's names, but she's probably one of the only people who has given me a massive amount of assistance, trying to get things done. Mr Perrottet, when he was the local member, also tried. But for every government department, I didn't fit into a box of a normal business. So I just don't know what to do. I'm at a complete loss as to whether I'm still in business tomorrow or whether I stay tied up to a post at Wisemans Ferry for another 12 months and shut everything down. Thank you for your time. If anyone would like to hear my longer story, please feel free to contact me at any time.

Mr DAVID TOLSON, before the Committee: Good afternoon. I am one of the sons of one of the large players in the mushroom industry. We produce mushroom substrate at Mulgrave for approximately 25 per cent of Australia's mushroom production. During these most recent floods on 3 March, the South Windsor power supply was cut off because of flash flooding. That wasn't turned back on until 5 March. The Hawkesbury Valley Way was built to be a flood access path for the residents of Hawkesbury. Yes, it has done that, but in doing that it has actually reduced the access and egress out of the Mulgrave area. Marlene Hudson's house was resumed for the Hawkesbury Valley Way, and the Railway Road North was basically where the Hawkesbury Valley Way is now. So the access point for Railway Road North went further north, taking it deeper into the flood area. I would say the height for flood access and egress out of Mulgrave has been reduced by about two metres since that time.

As a business, we've written to the local member and also the council to consider raising Railway Road South, which would then get back close to the same level it was. We see that's pretty important because the control centre for the railway line from Richmond to Riverstone is at Mulgrave. During this last flood, we actually had to assist railway staff to get vehicles out of floodwater because they were at work. They weren't expecting it to rise as much, and they got caught in the floods. I'd also say the Bells Line of Road is something that definitely needs a lot of attention. It's the only way of going around. In the last floods of 2021 that actually got cut off, so there was no access to the other side. That made it so we weren't able to get mushrooms out of one of our facilities at Glossodia.

What's it worth to the industry? It's around about \$330,000 a day when we don't have egress out of the site. As a resident of the Hawkesbury, I live at Ebenezer and can talk on behalf of Ebenezer residents. People are very frustrated that they can't do anything with their banks. From my own property, I've lost an acre in slump. Back in 2016 I tried going through the red tape of bureaucracy, trying to get approval for stabilisation of the banks. It just got to the stage where it was just too hard. There were too many government departments. I just ended up giving up. I'd already spent around about \$30,000-plus on trying to get approval. At some stage you've just got to walk away. I see many people just go ahead and do it because they now find it's cheaper to pay the fines than to actually go through the proper process. That really needs to change.

Ms MEL OLSEN, before the Committee: G'day, everybody. As a Wiradjuri woman, I'd like to first acknowledge the Darug people, the traditional custodians of the land. I'm here from the Women's Cottage in Richmond, which provides information, advocacy and referral for women and children of the Hawkesbury. I just want to give an overview of community services in terms of the impacts and what we've experienced. I'm also a local. I was born and raised in North Richmond, so I've seen the area grow quite dramatically in terms of population and diversity. What I haven't noticed a lot of is an increase in infrastructure, in investment in places

where people can go to be safe, and in roads. We're aware of the circumstances. It's nothing new for us in terms of what we experience in the Hawkesbury, with the flooding and the fires. But what I feel needs to change is that there is an investment in services being here, in our area being a priority rather than other LGAs servicing our region.

At a time of floods and crisis, if there are no services and no spaces for people to go because they are cut off, that creates a huge level of strain on current services that are already underfunded and are often stretching beyond their capacity at these times. I'd really just like to encourage that the Hawkesbury be seen on the map as an area of its own that has unique needs. We have always been, and will always be, a rural and remote region. We also have areas where it is built up. But each individual pocket community requires different things. Ensuring that those needs are met appropriately can only be done by the people of that community, by the services within that community and by locals who understand.

In my career alone, I've spent 25 years saying the same thing, advocating for there to be more availability of local services, to have better-resourced community centres, to have things that are available rather than people needing to travel on roads that are often no good, without reception. All these things that are important to people's ability to be resilient are simply not invested in because it's easier to just do an outreach. But then when times like this happen, nobody can get to those places that they need to be. We saw that with a lot of the neighbourhood centres. We saw that we were pushed out, as community services, from developing an ongoing relationship with vulnerable people. But we also saw that there weren't enough places for people to go when the floods hit and there weren't transport options for them to get there that were safe.

So there were many things that really come down to investment in the Hawkesbury—whether it be business, whether it be community services. But overall it's really looking at the Hawkesbury LGA as being somewhere that is a growth area. The experience is that we simply didn't have what we needed, even though we knew that these situations were going to happen.

Ms LAURA DORAHY, before the Committee: Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. I do have a neurological condition, so please excuse me if I cannot find my words at times. I live in McGraths Hill, which is about five kilometres east of Windsor. We do not have water views. We are not near the river. We live in a small suburb, but we were in dense housing. We lived in a house that was double storey, and all of the houses in our cul-de-sac and in our adjoining streets are double storey. They have to be because of the risk of flooding. I believe we are in a one-in-25-year flood zone, so our houses are actually designed to not develop anything in the bottom floor. We walk straight up the stairs and our living areas are upstairs. I just wanted to give you a little bit of an idea of context.

In 2021 and 2022, we got the call to evacuate and we evacuated as per instructions. Some of our neighbours decided to stay, but we decided to evacuate. We had to evacuate outside the Hawkesbury. Once we evacuated to Seven Hills, to my sister's house, and once we evacuated to Bowral. What I want to present to the Committee today is about evacuation procedure. I think we have all done an evacuation procedure, either in our office or in a parliamentary building or in our school. When we evacuate, we evacuate until we are told it is safe to return. This is the issue. When we got told to evacuate, on both occasions we never got an indication that it was safe to return. I am going to, if you will give me a moment, go back to the 2021 floods. What happened in the 2021 floods is—my son was staying with friends. He went back to our house and took a picture of himself standing on tar. Sure, there were big puddles around him, but he was standing on tar.

The roads were open and we thought it was okay to return. We returned to the house, not realising that there was a second wave of water coming up through the stormwater drain. The next morning we woke up and the water was higher than it was in the first phase of that flooding. I am going to stand here today and say that I take full responsibility for the next part of this story. I had to appear in Canberra for an inquiry similar to this for the agency I worked for, and I made a decision to enter the floodwaters to get to higher ground. Unfortunately, I contracted bacterial spinal meningitis as a result of entering those floodwaters. That was in 2021. Ever since then I have had seizures, and just recently I have been hospitalised for 100 days due to seizures happening three times a day. I now have a functional neurological disorder that means that I lost the ability to walk and was using a wheelchair. As you can see, I am still struggling to walk two years later.

Can the doctors make a direct connection between the spinal meningitis and the functional neurological disorder? No. Do I take full responsibility for entering the floodwaters? Yes. What I am saying is that I am not an expert. If it looks dry outside my house, I think it is okay to return. All I am asking is that if you ask people to evacuate, give them an indication of when it is safe to return. What we also find is that we have to keep coming back and checking because we do not know. We do not know whether the water has receded. Facebook is going hectic. We have to keep coming back to check whether the water levels have receded enough for us to return to our house. All I am asking for this Committee to consider is that there is an indication via SMS to those people

who were evacuated when it is clear to return home and it is safe to start rectification works. Thanks so much for your time.

Ms JEANETTE HAYDEN, before the Committee: Good afternoon. First of all, I would like to acknowledge all the Indigenous people as the traditional owners and custodians of the Hawkesbury and also, on behalf of my own Indigenous ancestors, the Elders and all who went before them, and those who come after them. I thank you for the privilege of actually speaking with you this afternoon. To members of the Select Committee and to members of the public, here is my story. I am a pensioner, I am a war widow and I turn 71 next week. I live on my own, and I live at a residence that I have been at for 31 years. I am the custodian of my town block in North Richmond, which backs onto Redbank Creek, which runs into the Hawkesbury River. In the past I have consulted with the Hawkesbury-Nepean authority regarding guidance to my property and the creek bank, and also Parks and Wildlife, who informed me that this creek and its banks were a potential wildlife corridor.

The floods of 2020 and 2021 caused erosion of the creek bank on my back property. My back fence is the waterline where the creek meets my property. In 2020, council stated it had no funds to rectify the problem. Again, in 2021 the council did nothing. No-one at all inspected the damage and it was referred to the local land council under a grant for rehabilitation and restitution, which was approved. Sadly, with nothing having been done in the interim, the 2022 floods caused the damage I now have, which is a landslide right to the retaining wall, just nine feet from my back steps. The full extent of the damage that night was not revealed until days later, when the water receded, revealing the landslide. My insurance company for the property damage sent an engineer and has observed and provided an engineer's report, stating that it is a transitional landslide and needs emergency make safe to protect the retaining wall that protects the stability of my home. The council engineer, when they bothered to come two months later, stated the same.

But nothing has happened, and I am having great difficulty obtaining financial help. In all of my years I have never had to apply for help or assistance. I lost three-quarters of my backyard, and every time it rains more of my backyard slides away and goes out to the continental shelf. In these last few days of rain I have lost another three feet of my backyard. I have been unsuccessful in gaining a grant to repair the damage or even put towards the make safe that the engineers have stated is essential to prevent further damage. Only three trees remain. The border fences between neighbours—gone; steps—gone; and nothing for the insurance company to restore the fences et cetera as per my property.

The insurance company does not ensure the dirt, which is—or was—part of my assets. No-one really wants to know about it or do anything about it. The only damage they want to assess or to consider is house damage, but the dirt is also part of an asset. The assets are not just the house and the pots and pans. I could not get the SES to come and do the flood damage assessment. Every contact with the SES, the story was the same—that they could not do it—and it changed every time I contacted them. Finally they stated that I had to make an appointment. Eventually they did, and the Hawkesbury SES rang up and cancelled that. During the peak flood, the SES failed to send a text message for me to evacuate when the Redbank estate dam looked as if it was going to break. That is a long story that I will not go into.

I was left that night with the SES and their bungling sending me to the wrong place, at the age of 70, to drive over Bells Line of Road with the beginning of the landslips, the rock falls and the massive potholes, in the dark, in the pouring rain, on my own, to get to my daughter on the other side of the now closed, flooded Hawkesbury River for somewhere to stay, as my family and friends all live on the other side. This is not about safety, the way the SES treated it, and it is not fair for people who live here. The other issues, to try to cut it short, relate to the application of the grants. I went down to the flood centre at South Windsor and I was told that, yes, you can apply for the two grants. I have only found out this week that, no, you cannot apply for both grants. But I was told you can.

You can apply for the two, but you can only get one. But the problem I've had is I've been told that, as a pensioner on a pension, my income is too high to qualify for one of the grants. I've also been told that my assets are too high and therefore I can't have the grant. For the other grant, for the Back Home one, I was told that, "Oh no, we're not going to look at this because your property is a rental property." I've lived there for 31 years. I asked why. This was to my face at the centre. I was then told, "But it's a rental property." "Why?" "Because your address is a post office box." I've got a post office box so the snails don't eat the mail, and for my own safety and the security of my mail.

I then had to provide documentation, which they would not accept. They would not accept my rates, they would not accept the utility bills—they would not accept those things. They would not even accept my DVA pension card. They wanted my Centrelink card. They wanted my Centrelink paperwork. They were not geared to the fact that someone could be a DVA pensioner. Three times I had to go back to the assessors. Finally, one of the women with Service NSW at the flood disaster centre actually stated to me, "Look, if there's so much damage,

dear, the Government can buy it back from you and you can move." I was horrified, upset and distressed. I'd already been accused that my own property I've lived at for 31 years was actually a rental property. Then they tell me I should sell it.

Because of the amount of damage, three-quarters of the backyard is gone. The reduced price is that I won't get the actual value it was worth. With the money that I would get, I would not have enough money to relocate. Is this the Government's way of relocating us elderly people into retirement? The question has to be asked. I've had nothing but trouble and I've made reports. I've even had to make a complaint about Service NSW. I've been to the Minister. I've heard nothing. I've been to other Ministers and it's a case of pass the parcel between the Ministers as to what happens. It's not satisfactory. This is what they put us through. We're already traumatised. We are not like the businesses, and they are ignoring the pensioners and the older community who live on their own. I'll cut it there.

The CHAIR: Thank you. If you wish, you can table your statement so we can incorporate it into our—

JEANETTE HAYDEN: I've actually supplied a copy to the secretariat.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I wasn't sure if it was submitted formally.

JEANETTE HAYDEN: Yes, it is. I'm sorry it is so long but it is complicated.

The CHAIR: No worries. It is fine.

Mr MICHAEL GREENTREE, before the Committee: I live at Vineyard. I work at Australiana Pioneer Village. We've been wiped out both years. It was totally unnecessary. Previous government kept 20 per cent of Warragamba Dam as air fill. That is enough to reduce your flood from 13 metres to 10 metres. It won't affect anybody. That is a greedy government. Three metres is a big difference. That's all it takes to go from a baby flood to a big flood. This mongrel Government wants to put an extra 15 metres of wall on top, which won't necessarily do a damn thing.

The next problem is it is a sandstone base. Sandstone you can crush in your hands. It is weak. How on earth will it hold back that floodwater? Right now, when that dam is full at 105 metres of water, it has 900 million tonnes of force pressing on it. It would love to push it down to Penrith. Put another 15 metres of water on it, it will push it down to Penrith—and it won't stop at Penrith or Hawkesbury. It will push it clear through to Parramatta. It will take out Prospect Reservoir at the same time. It will be useless. You will lose all of your water for domestic use—gone. It will take you 10 years to rebuild it. You will lose half a million people in the process. They will be drowned, and we have a government that wants to see that through. Any questions? I'm done.

The CHAIR: I think you're done, sir. Thank you for your contribution.

Ms LISA SULLIVAN, before the Committee: Good afternoon. Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. I have lived in the Hawkesbury for over 20 years. This year we had four metres of water through our house, and three metres through our house last year. We are still displaced—my husband, myself and two teenage children. There is a whole level of things that are going okay and there are a whole lot of things that are a huge frustration to us. The best of communities work together. Last year's flood was a community-led recovery before we were able to get services to assist our neighbourhood and our community. This year we have seen it improve, but there are definitely areas that we can improve from here.

What we have seen this year is that we do get on-the-ground help pretty quickly to us. We are based in Windsor, and before the bridges are open and access to our remote communities of the Hawkesbury, we do get assistance. However, that doesn't necessarily roll out enough to our remote communities. We're finding that the layering of not only bushfires but multiple floods in this area has meant that people's mental health here has suffered significantly over the last few years. What we're finding with this flood is the clean-up recovery has been really tough on individuals and communities as a whole. We did get short amounts of time to have a task force on the ground to help individuals as well as public spaces, but it wasn't enough. The State has done a pretty good job in cleaning up but there are ways that we can improve on this.

Individually, what we see with four metres of water through our house is a slow rise of water and a slow release. What that looks like is our bottom floor submerged and 1½ metres into our middle floor. We do have around about 24 hours' solid time to get stuff to higher ground and we have a very comprehensive flood plan. That looks like a shipping container delivered and it filled with everything, including the kitchen sink down to ceiling fans and downlights. We get trades in, we get the toilets out—we get everything out. It is a bare shell. We have got a comprehensive flood plan. We were aware when we bought our property that it was flood affected. It was built in 1846. It has been through even the 1867 flood. It is going nowhere, and it is resilient. We are resilient. But as Michael said before, we don't feel that we're getting backing by the dam being at full capacity.

The soils at the moment are sodden. There is a pooling of water everywhere you look. We are only a medium-level weather event away from seeing this all again. June is historically the wettest and most flood-prone month. With that comes a whole lot of anxiety, not just for us but our kids and our communities. We're frustrated with the talk that is happening around about the levels of the dam but no action. We really need a whole other level of something done to give us a little bit of peace of mind that someone's got our back here, because at the moment we have got a plan, our community is connected really well, we're doing a whole number of things to make us resilient, but we don't have that backing at the moment with the dam.

The other level I do need to include is flood insurance. When we bought our property, it was insurable and it was affordable. After the 2011 Brisbane floods, they reformatted insurance and it is now from \$15,000 per year upwards. We would like to see something similar to the Northern Australia policy that has, for cyclones, allowed affordable cyclone insurance for those affected properties. We don't have that for flood-affected properties. The other thing is that we would like to see a flexible flood policy be made available, where we can choose—like contents insurance—the amount of coverage that we require to recover our homes personally. They are not floating away. We just need clean-up and recovery costs. That is not being offered by our insurance companies.

The other thing is development on the flood plain. I am sceptical that the raising of this dam has anything at all to do with flood mitigation and has everything to do with housing development on the flood plain. The one thing that I have also observed in these last few floods is that traditional affected areas by flood—Marsden Park and Box Hill—did not flood in both last year's and this year's flood. That is because they had sophisticated drainage put into those housing developments, which means that it is additional run-off into South Creek. Last year's flood water that entered our home was a brown muddy tinge of South Creek water. There is photographic evidence from the sky showing a clear delineation between river water and South Creek water. That is what goes through our house.

The other thing that we had, just to finish off, was five days of raw sewage flowing in our backyard after the floodwater receded this year. That was toilet paper, solids and everything in our yard for five days. That was left for us to clean up and disinfect. At this point in time, we have had enough. If we don't have any level of support from the State around lowering the dam levels, which was one of the options in the EIS, then—I am sick of the talk and no action. We need it now while we are in the middle of La Nina and a big wet season. What other time are you going to do it? We really need action now. This anxiety and this mental health issue that we've got layering up here in the Hawkesbury is real. We've had enough.

Ms FIONA GERMAINE, before the Committee: Good afternoon. Look, I think the best way to start is: What's my context? What am I doing here? I am not a direct flood victim. What I did in the 2021 floods, if you saw any imagery with all of those Woolies hampers flying around and all of those goods, that is what I did and that is what I organised. I facilitated and brokered that deal with Woolworths. It really highlighted this need for a mass mobilisation and to do it really quickly. So that is what I do. My husband and I set up an organisation to sit between local government agencies and local charities and, you know, make them work a little bit better together to get people what they need and then connect that with the private sector, who have a huge supply of goods and can do that really quickly through their infrastructures.

But, predominantly, the real thing that came out about that was that there was no real connection between how the charities, who know the intimate needs of the community in these emergency situations, are working with the government agencies. There is really no streamlined response here. It's a really difficult situation because you have people who are in desperate need of welfare in an emergency situation. There is no welfare west of the Hawkesbury. That sits squarely on the charities, like Mountain of Joy and Hawkesbury's Helping Hands. That's a huge undertaking for those people and then they have to work in with the government agencies and there is no real mechanism to do that. There is no turnkey and there is a lot of friction. Under the flood sub plan—I think 4.3 and 5.6, community resilience and flood resupply—these agencies do need to work with local entities and private individuals. Whilst this isn't a complaint against those agencies because we would be absolutely lost without our volunteer agencies and local charities as well, we do need a way to streamline those together quickly. The way that I did that was, you know, through our local members and trying to get access directly with the SES.

What I think is really important to illustrate here is that living in the Hawkesbury, it is not so simple to just call an SES hotline and, as directed by the State member, to fill in a Service NSW form. Working with the local charities we do a lot of data collection, basically, and raising requests on behalf of numerous households. For kicks, I tried one with Upper Colo. There were 11 households. I filled in the Service NSW form for emergency goods, which are things like nappies, formula, urgent things that these people need and fuel because their generators are running out. It gets pretty dark out there. Can you imagine running for days without what they need? Anyway, filling out the Service NSW form there was no receipt number and there was no way to contact that. Someone contacted me four days later via phone to see how that need request went. I had already logged that

through our system that we navigated directly with the SES. That involved turning up at the SES's doorstep and convincing them that we can help them work with the charities to actually deliver the goods that they don't have access to.

What my husband and I have done is—we have access to these goods to supply people. That is something the Government can't really do. The Government can't connect that with the local charities. They do not know the intimate needs and the local charities can't work with those private sectors. You are talking about things like Woolworths sending out 25 pallets of perishables. Where is that going to go? What coolrooms does that get juggled between? How is that disbursed? Who has a forklift? There is a lot to this. We absolutely need these emergency services and streamlined emergency services west of the Hawkesbury. If that is not the case, then we need more funding to the local charities west of the Hawkesbury and we actually need these local governments to facilitate their agencies to work better with the private organisations and charities on the ground. That is absolutely something that needs to happen.

We need a seat at the table. This is not the table. Five minutes is not enough to go through all the data. I mean, I have numerous cases of people in dire situations and Peppercorn agency contacting my charity saying, "We haven't had contact with elderly and vulnerable people in Lower Portland since 10.30 last night. We need a welfare check. How do we facilitate that? We know that they are running out of food and we haven't heard from them since the night before." That kind of situation is occurring, and that is just one. We have supplied hundreds of households. Last year it was thousands when we had Bells Line of Road cut off and people did not have provisions for that. It's a really important point that I want to knock on the head because people ask, "Why don't people in need have goods stocked up in their pantry or nappies galore?" and all of these things. They don't. There are financially disadvantaged people who live a few days at a time. There are people who just mentally can't prepare and don't have the skill sets for it.

We know the Government even struggles to prepare for the floods because we are having a different climate at the moment. We are having different weather events, as they so like to call them. We really need to adapt and prepare these communities better. We really can't judge. But we need to be able to mobilise the support for these communities better. We need to have a really effective round table about how that's going to happen on a logistics level, because the Government cannot do what we've been doing between the charities and the charities can't quite do what we've been doing connecting the private sector. I really want to take that further.

Mr GEOFFREY FARRANCE, before the Committee: Good afternoon. I've been a local in the Pitt Town area since 1975. I bought a property knowing it was going to be flood free, so that was a good plus. I live on Old Pitt Town Road, between the sports club and Schofield Road. Opposite me is the national park or, as it's colloquially known, the national sparks and wildfire. I have seen that road sort of in reasonable condition and I have seen it in poor condition. For a long time the council could never get any money to do the road up and so quite often we just had to wear it. After this first flood in 2021, it got a bit worse. It was patched up by just filling the holes up over the dirt. Of course, that doesn't last very long.

In this last flood, it got even worse. I had the opportunity from 1982, I think it was, to be the president of the progress association. I saw how the town had gone from a population of 900 to 1,900 in the last election, when I was handing out for the Labor candidate. I can only say that the problems that we have with the flood evacuation route is that the Government made it a flood evacuation route but never put any money into it. The road that goes through the national park—I walk my dogs up there regularly—is wide enough for 1½ vehicles. In this last flood—as you can imagine and as you've heard from other people—it is mayhem.

Near my house is quite a sharp corner. My neighbour has had two cars through his front fence. Only six or seven months ago we had a bus come across the road and get jammed between his fence and a power pole, and it took my corner post out. When you've got a situation of a flood, people are not really concentrating on what they're doing because they're worried about getting home or getting out. My concern would be that one of these days when there is a flood—and there will be another one—we will have a bad accident somewhere and then your flood evacuation route stops. There is a responsibility for a government to follow through on its promises. Unfortunately, with the current Government there is not much happening there, probably because this area has been considered a blue-ribbon seat, so they didn't have to worry about losing an election. Thank God this time they did. Why should we suffer poor conditions when there is the ability and money there to do the right thing?

The biggest problem that occurred is when the new estate started. All the people there are going to realise that if you get a really big flood, they turn the water off, they turn the power off and everybody has to evacuate. Where do they have to evacuate? At one stage it was going to be at Scheyville, but once the national parks took that over that stopped that being an area where people could go. I believe people have to go as far as Seven Hills. It's rather a long way from where your home is and where things are. Why is it that we don't get the information from governments about why the responsibilities are not being looked after? Our road is—there is a joke that says

it's a good tank track for the army to have a go at, because all along the road, from Pitt Town all the way through to the roundabout—that's Boundary Road—it is pitiful. The only safe way to drive along that road at the moment is right down the middle.

Ms SUSAN TEMPLEMAN, on behalf of Jess Micallef, before the Committee: Jess has asked me to read this:

My name is Jessica and I have been with my husband David for 19 years. Together, we have 3 boys. Thomas 10, Joel 9 and Justin 7. My husband and I both come from agricultural backgrounds. We bought our business "Abulk Turf" in December, 2018. Since then, we have encountered three floods. Each and every one has been different due to the lack of infrastructure and neglect that we believe Cornwallis and Richmond Lowlands has endured. We understand the risks of running a business in a flood prone area hence why we do not live on the farm. Flooding is a natural occurrence and we believe that it plays a vital part in successful farming. Ironically, we are there for the water but also the rich farming land that seems to be so scarce these days.

I have committed to reading excerpts, so now some detail about the history of what's happened and how the landforms have changed since the last flood in 1994. She says:

Nothing has been done to improve infrastructure since 1975 even though it is noted that the increase of water runoff has significantly increased due to development. Unfortunately, the Richmond Lowlands and Cornwallis have and will continue to cop the brunt of this injustice. Our first encounter with flooding occurred in February 2020. The Warragamba Dam was only at 40% capacity at the time. We flooded due to localized water. The unmaintained rivers, creeks and drains failed to operate and still to this day we have no understanding of who (local council, state government?) is responsible for them. They are blocked, overgrown and just purely neglected. Landowners have put their hand up to clean them themselves as they also recognize the importance they play, but due to red-tape they are unable to touch them. Along with poor managed rivers, creeks and drains, we had a major fail in an outlet drain which meant that we were trapped for an unnecessary 14 days further, resulting in us losing approx. 3m1 dollars worth of turf stock. The council owns this outlet drain ...

She goes on to talk about the evidence you heard this morning when you visited Cornwallis about how council's process played out, the fact that they were only able to replace one bit of it, and that it was then hit again in 2021 and in 2022. This is how she describes that:

Feb 2022, we are faced with yet another flood. This time flooding prematurely thanks to our new bank opening. The gorge has now blown to an incredible 150m in width. The most devastating part of this flood is that all the excess soil that was blown in from the gorge is now all over us. Our crops are smothered in soil and destroyed... Some nearly picket fence height in depth. Another 4/5m1 dollars loss.

She then talks about the second flood that came and how that did even more damage, and that the costs of replanting are extraordinary. She has put details about that in the entire letter that she has tabled. She goes on to say:

My family have not just suffered financially, but also emotionally ... The biggest frustration that while flooding is totally natural, the events that have occurred over the last 3½ years is not. Every single part of what we have endured could have been avoided. From the neglect of the creeks, rivers and manmade drains to the outlet drain. Without the entire system in working order, we will continue to suffer and it seems to the entire community that the resolution is a distant fantasy.

I will leave you with these words:

Farming is a hard gig, and I challenge anybody who disagrees to "give it a go". While you're "giving it go" throw this situation amongst it and report your outcome. I now have a deeper understanding for mental illness. I have sympathy for wives, husbands, mothers, fathers and children who witness the destruction and total life disturbance. I had a call from my children's school after the 2021 flood asking if my boys need to see the counsellor as they themselves couldn't function without getting emotional and distracted. They were broken because they saw their Father and their Mother broken. They were confused because they couldn't comprehend that 'if something needed to be fixed, why wouldn't you fix it?' It would have saved all this heartache.

Mr JOHN CHAMPION, before the Committee: We've been on the river now for 50 years, but lately it's becoming worse. There seems to be no solution. We end up with no power, which is understandable; we end up with no water, because power runs our pumps; and then we end up with no communications, because the internet goes down. They keep telling us that they've got a tower but it's inoperable when there's no power there, which in this day and age seems ridiculous. Why can't whoever runs it, Telstra or whoever, put a generator in? Without communication, you're lost. We were in the house by ourselves for quite a considerable amount of time—no power, no water, no phone, no communication at all. Where we live was like an island. The road was cut off. Up the mountain, the road was cut off. Just behind us, the road was cut off. Nobody could go anywhere. It's becoming a bit of a joke that in this day and age communications can't be fixed. Obviously power can't be fixed if it's under water, but I just think that people have really got to take a note and look at these things and provide a better service for the people of the Hawkesbury that live out on the river.

Ms SOPHIE DEVINE, before the Committee: I am Lisa Sullivan's next-door neighbour. I'm slightly higher than Lil, so it didn't get into my second storey. We're back in our house now without a few essentials but we're feeling quite good about that. There are just a couple of technical points that I wanted to point out rather than a story about myself. We asked at the end of last year's flood for a gauge on South Creek. Lil went into details about how South Creek flooded first rather than the river, so that indication is vital. I don't know why it hasn't happened. I suspect I know why, because it's going to uncover a lot of information about all of the overland

flooding from development at Box Hill. There's that. Lower Macdonald valley, I think you heard that today, and also at last year's flood there was no indicator at Yarramundi. It didn't seem to be an urgent fix and then we flooded and obviously that was a vital piece of information. Along with that, there is one personalised tool that we're all using. It's made by one man. It was a piece of technology he put together himself, which is called Floodwatch Gauge, which brings in all of the data from the BOM and displays it in a really nice fashion. It is very easy to understand. Nobody here used anything else and I just don't know why that type of data is not available in some sort of formalised way.

I called the SES last year for sandbags and they said they weren't doing them. I called council this year and they said, "It's not my problem. Figure it out yourself." Whereas, two other surrounding councils did all the sandbags the day before—Blacktown and Penrith. I think it's a key indicator. If you think about how to advise a community that we're about to flood if they have no idea, is their local council actually doing something tangible and obvious, which is pallets of sandbags. We were already flooded; we already had water in when council started doing sandbagging. Maybe not quite but we were well on our way. We had to fill them up ourselves; we don't have time for that. "There's a pile of sand and sandbags. Go up to the local park and get it." You're already stuck; you're already isolated by that point. But, again, it is a tangible thing that the community can visualise and that says, "If council is doing this, this must be important. I must pay attention." Something like that. The evacuation centre at Richmond, I think Linda from Hawkesbury Helping Hands had to go at 11 o'clock at night and deliver sleeping bags and toothbrushes and clean underwear. The evacuation centre was open but not resourced. Again, that led to a charity having to fill in the gap.

One thing that did happen really well is Endeavour Energy this year. They came straight away, locked our power off, offered to pay for it this time. You did not have to get your grade two electrical guy there, which is very difficult to get. But what we did have is some cowboys just turn up the following day and say that they were sent by Endeavour Energy and try to tell everybody that they had been sent there. We knew that was garbage so we sent them away. But, again, they were preying on vulnerable people. Did they do the right job? Were they actually level two graded people? I don't know. I couldn't tell you but it was suspicious and not great. Going to what Michael said about the dam, Stuart Ayres said on 2GB during the floods that the desalination plant was working overtime because the water quality of the dam was not drinkable because of the amount of waste and debris and green stuff in there. While we're flooding and there's excess water, it is not even water we can drink. To say that raising the dam wall for drinking water capacity and flooding it every time is suitable, I just don't see it. I think that was it.

Ms SAMANTHA MAGNUSSON, before the Committee: Thank you all for coming and listening to us. I am a resident of the Richmond lowlands. I live on the Hawkesbury River just down from the Richmond Bridge. My property has flooded three times in just over a year. Two of those were major floods. It was under water in that we were using a boat to get in and out. I was certainly not the worst affected by any means. We evacuated early, we got all our livestock off and we were relatively unscathed afterwards. But as I sit here today and listen to everyone else speak, I cannot impress upon you enough the horror of watching the water come down the river a few hours after water has been released from the dam. You have a flood and we sit out there and we watch it and then it just goes whoosh, and the speed and magnitude of that water with 100-year-old trees being swept down the river is unprecedented. I've lived in the Hawkesbury for eight years; I've never seen anything quite as damaging as what has happened over the past year.

The damage you all saw at Cornwallis was obviously man-made due to gross neglect from the local council. We're seeing that on a different scale in all areas of the flood relief and the flood mitigation. I don't want to go into a lot of the detail about the lack of services. You've all heard that. You've heard about the damage and the loss of business. You've heard about people's livelihoods being ruined. You've heard about businesses that are losing millions and millions of dollars with no future. You've seen the lowlands. You've seen the water sitting on the soil. People have sold cattle. People can't run their businesses. The heartbreaking thing about this, and I think I speak for many people in the Hawkesbury, is that we're sitting there listening to the radio, watching the TV, and we're watching a discussion about raising the dam wall. As we all know, that is a highly complex and nuanced issue. It is certainly something that the environmental impact statement has not adequately explained and it has not created a silver bullet. It is certainly not a silver bullet to this flooding situation.

As you've heard, all the floods are different. The 2020 flood was because of localised rainfall and urban flooding. It wasn't because of the dam wall. In one instance you've got, "We refuse to talk about using the current dam for mitigation." It is the big elephant in the room. What we should be talking about is how much water we want to take out and not, "We can't talk about it". We need to be talking about using the current dam as a mitigation dam. It was the recommendation of the royal commission in Queensland and as a result, the Wivenhoe Dam is now used as a mitigation dam. As you heard earlier, three metres is the difference between people being able to run their businesses, look after their families and not go into debt to the bank and people putting up their hands

and hopefully somehow still being able to find some work somewhere else. It is an absolute disaster that this is not being addressed.

There are two issues with raising the dam wall and the mitigation, and they are very distinct. One, if you have a raised dam wall, you are letting water out into a flooded river system. Using the current dam as a mitigation dam, you are releasing water before the flood event, based on advanced weather data. We have a desalination plant. As I said, the discussion should be how much water comes out of the current dam. We can't wait much longer. You saw the damage at Cornwallis, because that wasn't fixed when everyone said it needed to be fixed. We could have another major flood in a few months. It's costing us thousands. We are a very optimistic community out here. We are a very tight community and have become a lot tighter since the floods. We've all helped each other out. We've all had to pull together. We have a vision for a great future out here. It is one of the most beautiful parts of the country, if not the world, and you are destroying it because it is being politicised. Don't politicise it. Listen to the people who are in the community, what needs to be done, and the first thing that you can do—as I said, it's not a silver bullet. There isn't a silver bullet to this. Please discuss using the current dam as a mitigation dam.

Mr HUGH PERRY, before the Committee: I think Sam has pretty much said everything that I was going to say. I have lived in the Hawkesbury for 20 years and have seen minor flooding and major flooding. We all know it's not rocket science on how we can help the Hawkesbury Basin, let alone the river, and that is not at the last minute going, "Well, the dam's full. Open the floodgates and let it all out," especially when you know a major weather event has been happening and you're predicting heavy rains two weeks in advance. We know that because people move their livestock and get ready, and move everything out. The destruction that happens after letting large volumes of water down the Hawkesbury is actually catastrophic—you've seen that evidence today down at Cornwallis—let alone how it affects the businesses either side of the river.

The economic factors of those and mental issues that that has created in the community, I think, needs to be taken into account. It just seems to keep getting passed on and on and on, and the decision never gets made. Let alone building a new bridge, let's build two that go underwater when it floods. We've probably got enough smart kids in year 7 maths to come up with a theory on what volumes of water come into the catchment, and maybe release a little bit earlier. But we can't because the flood mitigation of Warragamba Dam has to be legislated. To me, it's not rocket science. It's releasing water gently beforehand out of Warragamba and not punishing the people who are left further down the river. That's all I have to say.

Mr EDDIE DOGRAMACHI, before the Committee: Most of you don't know me, what I do. I am an Independent councillor. I'm not Labor; I'm not Liberal. Naturally, coming from different parts of the world, we say what comes out of here. I've already been called a loose cannon, so I tell you how it is. We live in Pitt Town. We were stranded for about 2½ weeks. Luckily, we had hens, and I dare you to try to survive with eggs for about 10 days with bread, with my greatest respect to you all. I can't see our member in here. Where are you? I'm angry. Where is our Perrottet? What more important thing that he could have than here? You're taking all these notes, and we've been having this kind of forums for years and years. They were in power for what—10 years, 15 years? What did they do? When did he come when we had the floods? I was flooded, and when the silt came and accumulated in front of our house, I rang the council to ask for assistance. Do you know what they said? They said, "Put a DA." That's what they told me. That's what they told me, "Put a DA." When I started cleaning, in no time I received an email, saying that I was going to be fined. I said, "Go to hell. Fine me." This council is defunct. That is where it starts.

Then we have the Parliament. Where is Perrottet, like I said? We don't want his grin. We don't want his smile just before the election. Now we have Susan. Hopefully they will do something different. Now I wonder whether our Liberals will survive the next election when it comes to the council. You have no idea. Only yesterday I was on Lower Colo Road. When I came to the T-junction, turn left is Upper Colo and right is Lower Colo Road. This couple that I met, when I tell you how they survived—they had two beach balls. They used them, inflated them, and they could hang onto them. Now I do know you're taking notes, I don't know whether it will go to the right place or not. But none of you lived in this area—or maybe some of you. I witnessed these farmers crying. Now we have a water Minister. Whatever his name is, all he is interested in is to sell the water. That's what he is interested in.

What happens if something happens, if the dam bursts? Don't these people read any physics? Raise the wall, okay, and they raise it in another 10, 15 years' time when it overflows. Then what happens? If you lose one life—I know farmers in here. They lost their animals. They lost their cattle. The council, that kind of—I don't know what to say, what kind of word define councillors that—we have a town planner who is not a town planner. We have infrastructure managers and engineers order huge pipes. They arrived and the size was wrong, and we paid for it. We have a sewage problem. I raised it; I exposed it. You have to give me a couple more minutes like you did with the others because I am full up. We have this problem with the raw sewage. You don't know where

it is. I exposed them. Instead of buying two tanks of a couple of hundred thousand dollars, they went and hired fire tanker companies. Each trip is about \$2,000. We are up to here, about \$7 million, and it's still going on. I am going there at five o'clock in the morning taking photos, and I was there at nine o'clock last night—9.30 to be precise—and they were still collecting the waste and taking to them.

It's not only Federal Government. Put that aside. But it's New South Wales Government. They did absolutely nothing. You have potholes. I was in Grono Farm Road. When water comes in, it's nothing like—you've never seen it before. The holes are this big. If you're not careful, you'll drop in up to here. That's how it is. The interesting thing—I started distributing leaflets. I printed them, hundreds and hundreds. Yesterday I was at Sackville. The day before yesterday, I was at Grose Vale and Bowen Mountains. Guess what happened. I received an email, polite email. Council says, "Eddie, please do not interfere with council matters." This is the council that we have. I am praying to God that something happens next year so we replace all together, sack the council, sack the Liberal Government, so we can start fresh. I do apologise, but I'm very, very angry. I hope you will do something.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Councillor Eddie. Ladies and gentlemen, that concludes the number of people on our registered list. For anyone who has not spoken but has decided that they want to make a contribution to this inquiry, they can contact the secretariat staff, the three people over there. There's an online questionnaire where you can make a submission, if you wish.

Mr JOHN MARSHALL, before the Committee: I'm a resident and I'm not registered. My name is Marshall.

The CHAIR: As long as you give us your first and last name, jump up. I didn't check with my colleagues, sir, but sit down.

JOHN MARSHALL: I'm a resident on the lowlands. I don't want to take five minutes. I think you've heard from everyone here this afternoon that there's serious frustration here. The summary, in my opinion, is—the discussion is mitigation, mitigation, mitigation. Prevention is better than cure. To listen to all of this damage and the cost of this to the community is madness. It's madness. We only have to do a few things. We have to increase the capacity of the desalination plant. We have to dredge the river, and we don't fill the dam. It's simple. I don't want to be flooded. My colleagues behind me, the residents that live with us—we don't want this rubbish. We don't want this water coming down on us. This is a man-made policy. Does anyone in this room know how many people are affected? Can I ask anyone on the Committee here? Do we any idea of how many people are affected on the Hawkesbury River? Can anyone else give me a number?

The CHAIR: Sir, you have to address your comments to us.

JOHN MARSHALL: Sorry. Can anyone else in the room give me a number? I think that's appalling that we don't even know that to start with. It's 170,000 people that have been affected. That's in the Government reports. We haven't even done our—170,000 people. It's appalling. There's an 8,000-page report. There's a lot of hearsay, a lot of nonsense being spoken about tonight. I'm not a technician. I can't tell you whether we should raise the dam or we shouldn't raise the dam. We've got engineers that should be able to do that. All I'd like to leave you with is that leadership is an essential factor for our community here. Thank you for listening to me.

Mr NEALE TWEEDIE, before the Committee: Can I speak, please?

The CHAIR: Yes, but we finish at 5.30 p.m. So there's one more person after. Strict five minutes because we have to finish at 5.30 p.m.

NEALE TWEEDIE: That's okay. I don't go to bed till 11 o'clock. I'm a local businessperson. I have two businesses. One's an irrigation business and one's a turf farm. Both were flooded in this last flood; the turf farm in the previous floods as well. So we've actually had four floods in two years. I've been here since 1984, so I know a little bit about the area. Yes, we do get floods from the flood plain, as other people have said. So we're conditioned to that. But a lot of people that have come into the area in recent years have never seen a flood. This flood we just had or last two floods are actually a shot across the bow. If we get a one-in-100-year flood, we'll be in water where we are here now. In 1867 the flood was 19.5 metres. This last flood was 13.8 metres at Windsor. If we're standing in water here in a one-in-100-year flood, imagine 19.5 metres. You'll have people on rooftops, and they'll be drowning because you won't have enough flood boats to get them off the rooftops.

While we talk about the cost of not doing anything right now, there's a cost to all the businesses round here and all the people that have been displaced—\$84 million in lost turf sales last year, \$100 million this year. We're all affected in different ways—the mushroom guys and all the people who have been displaced. The inconvenience, the cost of doing things and repairing damage, it's absolutely immense. That hole you saw this

morning is probably a \$10 million fix. There's a cost of doing nothing and they'll be a cost of life of doing nothing as well. Thank you.

Ms JACKIE CARPENTER, before the Committee: I am a resident of South Windsor. But I'd like to talk to you about something that no-one else has brought up. My husband, who's lived here since 1984, has run a model aircraft club. He ran the State for 24 years—remote-controlled planes, cutting-edge technology, drones and all the other stuff that you see that's going on in the drive for our State to be great in technology. We have a club. We're on a flood plain because all the development is killing off the remote-controlled plane clubs in our State. There were 84 clubs. There's not that now. We know we've got to fly on a flood plain because we can't afford to buy a piece of land for some people to fly remote-controlled planes. They're all so noisy. We're happy in our little environment. We make no fuss. My husband's built the club from 30 club members to 160 club members. Average age is 65 and I'm the only woman. These guys, their wives have died and the only thing they hold onto is coming to the club.

Our club flooded last year. We were okay. It just flooded up to the steps of the clubhouse. This year, it went through the club, a metre and a half of water. We're not a classified sport. We can't get a grant. We've just dumped \$20,000 into 400 tonnes of road base to try and get membership back to our club. Five club members have stopped their jobs to sit on machinery that we've had to hire to let our club members back into the club. They have not been in the club since February. We flooded out, and we flooded, and we flooded, and we flooded. I've been taking documentary evidence about the overflow out of Sydney Water, through Transgrid, down Bandon Road and into the creek. Yesterday I had the EPA, Sydney Water, Blacktown Council in a meeting. They're all pointing the finger at each other, going, "It's not our fault." I want to know where the water's coming from. It's all foamy and smelly. They're telling me, "It's just the run-off." From where? It's tearing the road to pieces. It's like the Grand Canyon.

The 90-year-old man who saw a remote-controlled plane flying on the telly and went, "I'm going to try that," asked my husband, "Can you teach me how to fly?" He goes, "Yeah". So, age of 90, that man gets in his little sedan with his little plane in the back, choofs off down to the airfield. We've scraped up enough money to put an electronic gate because our club members have had strokes and they can't operate a padlock—20 grand in a road. So tomorrow—we can't wait—we're opening up the club. There are so many people hanging out and celebrating. You know what there's not? One guy. His funeral was last week. I leave you with that. I don't care about raising the dam wall. I love my community and I love what we do. We're forgotten in the Hawkesbury.

The CHAIR: Ladies and gentlemen, that concludes our proceedings.

The Committee adjourned at 17:29.