

PORTFOLIO COMMITTEE NO. 5 - REGIONAL NSW AND STRONGER COMMUNITIES

Wednesday, 6 April 2022

Examination of proposed expenditure for the portfolio area

EMERGENCY SERVICES AND RESILIENCE

UNCORRECTED

The Committee met at 09:30

MEMBERS

The Hon. Adam Searle(Acting Chair)

Ms Abigail Boy
The Hon. Scott Barrett
The Hon. Walt Secord
The Hon. Penny Sharpe
The Hon. Mark Buttigieg

PRESENT

The Hon. Stephanie Cooke, *Minister for Emergency Services and Resilience, and Minister for Flood Recovery*

CORRECTIONS TO TRANSCRIPT OF COMMITTEE PROCEEDINGS

Corrections should be marked on a photocopy of the proof and forwarded to:

**Budget Estimates secretariat
Room 812
Parliament House
Macquarie Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000**

The ACTING CHAIR: Welcome to the public hearing for the inquiry into budget estimates 2021-22. Before I commence, I acknowledge the Gadigal people, who are the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet today. I also pay my respects to Elders past, present and emerging of the Eora nation, and extend that respect to any other First Nations persons present. I welcome Minister Steph Cooke and accompanying officials to the hearing. Today the Committee will examine the proposed expenditure for the portfolio of Emergency Services and Resilience.

Before I commence I will make some brief comments about the procedure for today's hearing. Today's proceedings are being broadcast live from Parliament's website. A transcript will be placed on the Committee's website once it becomes available. In accordance with the broadcasting guidelines, media representatives are reminded that they must take responsibility for what they publish about the Committee's proceedings. All witnesses in budget estimates have a right to procedural fairness according to the procedural fairness resolution adopted by the House in 2018. There may be some questions that a witness could answer only if they had more time or with access to certain documents. In these circumstances, witnesses are advised they can take questions on notice and provide an answer within 21 days. If witnesses wish to hand up documents they should do so through the Committee staff.

Minister, I remind you and the officers accompanying you that you are free to pass notes and refer directly to your advisers seated at the table behind you—there seem to be a few. This is always very revealing because it applies to me: Everyone should turn their mobile phones off or to silent for the duration of the hearing. Before we turn to the witnesses to be sworn, Minister, the Committee received correspondence from the Government seeking to end today's inquiry early, at one o'clock, due to the unavailability of some of the officials in the afternoon. The Committee has this morning deliberated and has decided to accede to that request, but on the understanding that we receive a rescheduled half-day hearing with officials only. It is the Committee's preference that that occur before Easter but obviously the Committee secretary will have to liaise with officials to work out an appropriate time. In good faith, we have acceded to the request.

Ms STEPH COOKE: With all due respect, Chair, our commissioners have made alternative arrangements, feeling that we could not wait for your decision as a Committee, which is completely understandable. We have made alternative arrangements and all commissioners or acting commissioners who are here today will be able to see out today's hearing.

The ACTING CHAIR: Okay. This morning was, in fact, the first opportunity we could deliberate.

Ms STEPH COOKE: I understand that, yes, but under the circumstances, with the weather conditions that we are facing, we had to put alternative arrangements in place regardless. We could not assume that we would be granted the request, so we put alternative arrangements in place. Everyone here now is available for the duration of today.

The ACTING CHAIR: We will see how we go.

Ms STEPH COOKE: Thank you.

The ACTING CHAIR: All witnesses need to be sworn before giving evidence. Minister, I remind you that you do not need to be sworn, given that you have already sworn an oath to your office as a member of Parliament and indeed as a Minister of the Crown. I remind the following witnesses that they do not need to be sworn as they have been sworn at earlier budget estimates hearings before the Committee: Commissioner Shane Fitzsimmons and Commissioner Rob Rogers. I think you have already given evidence at this round of budget estimates, so you do not need to be sworn. Is that so?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: We did, prior to Christmas.

The ACTING CHAIR: That is right. These are the supplementary hearings, so you remain on your oath. All of the witnesses will need to swear either an oath or an affirmation.

Deputy Commissioner DAMIEN JOHNSTON, Corporate Services, NSW State Emergency Service, sworn and examined

Acting Commissioner DANIEL AUSTIN, NSW State Emergency Service, affirmed and examined

Acting Commissioner MEGAN STIFFLER, Fire and Rescue NSW, affirmed and examined

Commissioner ROB ROGERS, NSW Rural Fire Service, on former oath

Commissioner SHANE FITSIMMONS, Resilience NSW, on former oath

The ACTING CHAIR: Today's hearing will be conducted from 9.30 a.m. until 12.45 p.m., with a 15-minute break at 11 a.m. There will be questions from the Opposition and then from the crossbench only. If required, an additional 15 minutes at the end is allocated to the Government until one o'clock. The afternoon session will commence at 2.00 p.m. with public servants only. It being 9.34 a.m., we will commence with questioning from the Opposition. Ms Sharpe?

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Thank you. Good morning, Minister, and to your officials. Before we get into this today, I wish to put on record our thanks for all of the work that you are doing under very difficult circumstances. I congratulate you, Minister, in your new role, which is a very big role. Minister, in 2017 after the Lismore floods there were a number of reviews. In particular, there was a Lismore Citizens Review where they went through within the community and talked through all of the issues that had occurred there. In their conclusion to that review, they said:

The section in the NSW SES Independent Review Page 44 titled Region Response ... describes a chaotic staffing regime at the SES Regional Headquarters that reads more like a TV comedy script from Yes Minister or Utopia than a high quality emergency management team that the community relies on and expects. Unfortunately the ramifications for the community were disastrous and for many their livelihoods were destroyed.

Minister, that was obviously five years ago. **What has changed since then, given what we have seen in the last few weeks?**

Ms STEPH COOKE: Thank you very much. As you have quite rightly identified, that was in 2017, which not only predates my time as Minister but even my time in this place. What I would say is that the SES continues to be funded by the Government. We have increased our funding to the organisation over the past several years. There is no doubt that—

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: By how much, Minister?

Ms STEPH COOKE: The budget for the 2021-22 year was \$193.1 million for recurrent and \$47.3 million for capital, which is a total of \$240.4 million. This is a record budget for the SES.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Okay. That is great. What was it in 2017?

Ms STEPH COOKE: I will just take that on notice, thank you.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: All right. We will move on from that, thank you. The reason I used that quote was that, as I was looking at the material, I thought it was an incredibly powerful sign of where the community had been at. There had been reviews and were obviously concerned that, after all of that, there does not appear to have been much change. I just want to take you through and get you to describe to me the roles of each of the organisations as occurred in February and March this year. What is the role of the SES?

Ms STEPH COOKE: The role of the SES, as it relates to the events of February and March this year, is as the combat agency. Under the SERM Act, the SES is the combat agency for flood, storm and tsunami. So, in relation to the most recent event, they have led the initial response to what we now know has been an unprecedented disaster. They were responsible for coordinating the evacuations, for carrying out flood rescues and responding to requests for assistance, not just in the Northern Rivers region but right across New South Wales where we did see this event impact 58 local government areas. An enormous part of the State was impacted and of course we have seen this storm and flood season from late last year dish out event after event, impacting just about every corner of the State and is still ongoing as we speak.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Sure. It is a very serious matter. We know that. Minister, on that basis, how many SES people were on the ground in Lismore on 25 February?

Ms STEPH COOKE: As that question is of an operational nature, I might ask Acting Commissioner Austin to answer the question, please.

DANIEL AUSTIN: Thank you, Minister. The New South Wales SES had all of its units across the Northern Rivers as well as additional resources that had been moved—not only SES resources but other agency resources as well—and also had brought in additional instant management personnel to support local decision-making and the like. That was supported across the State by the regimes that sit behind that to support and coordinate. So, numerous additional personnel were moved on the days—

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Are you able to give us some figures? You can take them on notice.

DANIEL AUSTIN: I will provide that to you shortly.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: We can come back to it in detail in the afternoon. We will have time this afternoon. That would be great. I also want to know how many volunteers—clearly, so many volunteers were actually impacted themselves, so it was a huge impact. If you could provide that information as well, that would be great. I will come back to some of the detail later this afternoon. What role does Resilience NSW play in the immediate response and afterwards?

Ms STEPH COOKE: Resilience NSW was established in 2020 to coordinate emergency management policy and lead whole-of-government prevention, preparedness and recovery efforts. Resilience supports the combat agencies set up out at the State Emergency Operations Centre.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: How does it do that? Specifically, how does that work? Maybe Commissioner Fitzsimmons can tell us that.

Ms STEPH COOKE: Thank you, Commissioner.

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: In a preparatory sense, we have got the State Emergency and Rescue Management Act. A derivative of the Act is the State emergency planning framework and architecture. We have got the parental body, which is the State Emergency Management Committee. They identify the planning and policy instruments around preparedness, readiness and then, in the event of response, how to effect that. We have what we call the SEOCON, which is a statutory position, which is a deputy commissioner of police. The SEOCON pulls together in support of the lead combat agency all the areas of government, emergency and other entities across government that have a role in response, support and assistance. We have that established, and the SEOC was established at Homebush to support the lead combat agency. Resilience staff provide staffing and resourcing to the SEOCON to assist with the establishment and running of the—

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Sorry, could you just spell out SEOCON for me?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: Sorry, Ms Sharpe. It is called the State Emergency Operations Controller. There is an acronym in everything, my apologies. SEOCON is the deputy commissioner of police who is assigned the SEOCON, and they also have a deputy SEOCON who can fulfil the role in their absence. For the sake of the complete picture and while we are exploring acronyms, we also have what we call a SERCON, which is a State Emergency Recovery Controller, under legislation—which is me as the head of Resilience NSW. The SERCON is the State Emergency Recovery Controller, which has the statutory responsibility for leading and coordinating whole-of-government efforts—government and non-government efforts—to support recovery from disasters of whatever scale. Resilience, like all the other agencies, provides a support role to the lead combat agency with resourcing, welfare functional area, coordination elements to support evacuation centres and those sorts of things—but also readying ourselves for the transition to recovery, particularly around relief arrangements like clean-up, wash-out and debris removal as we transition from the response phase, around life preservation and property protection, through to relief and recovery arrangements.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: That is great. Just to be clear, you have the SES on the ground, a police commissioner as the head person in the emergency response area and yourself and Resilience NSW as one of the controllers.

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: No, let me just clarify it. The single controller for the flood response is SES. Unequivocally, without question, without confusion, everyone gets in behind the SES.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: But the emergency response is operating at the same time that the floods were occurring.

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: SES were leading the response to the flood event and the storm-related events, as would be the case with fires. Commissioner Rogers and the RFS would lead all the response effort for the fires, and the rest of the State's emergency management architecture gets in behind and supports that effort. There is no confusion; there is no ambiguity about who is in charge of the response effort.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: Commissioner Fitzsimmons, who dropped the ball? Was it SES or was it Resilience NSW? Who dropped the ball and let down the North Coast?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: I am not aware of what ball has been dropped. You might have to elaborate for me.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: Have you not spoken to locals up there? Have you not spoken to people who have lost their homes?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: Yes, with respect, I have been up there several times and spoken with people. I have spoken with individuals; I have spoken with community members. I have also spent a lot of time on phones and videoconferences talking with people. I do not know what the ball is that you say has been dropped.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: Respectfully, sir, the North Coast community feels that the Government's response was woefully inadequate. I have been up there twice, and the question on everyone's lips is: Where was the help? Where was the response? Have you begun to look at why it occurred, why people were not warned, why people were not rescued and why people had to look after each other?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: I think you might be best to direct that question to Acting Commissioner Austin, but what we do need to identify is that what occurred up in the north-east of New South Wales was not predicted by the forecast. It was not captured in the forecast. It caught all manner of people unawares, and it resulted in extraordinary, widespread, unprecedented damage and destruction.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: But in 2017, almost five years ago, there was a major flood event. In February there was a major flood event.

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: No, nothing like what we saw this time around.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: And then in March—

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: Record-breaking this year.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: Yes, it was record-breaking, but it was three times in a five-year period. What happened? Why were you caught unawares? Is it because you are just a layer of bureaucracy above the SES?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: No, we are not, actually. I do not know how I can explain that any clearer. We are not above the SES.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: I have a specific example. Let us talk about the ADF then. Flood assistance was offered by the ADF to New South Wales emergency services on 25 February. Is that correct?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: Who is that question to?

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: I suppose to you, Minister, to start off with.

Ms STEPH COOKE: I will ask Acting Commissioner Daniel Austin to answer that question, being of an operational nature.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Sure. Minister, I will generally go through you and you can direct it to whoever you like.

Ms STEPH COOKE: Thank you, I appreciate that.

DANIEL AUSTIN: The discussions referred to on the twenty-fifth followed a briefing from the Bureau of Meteorology which indicated that the severe weather event that we were already in, which started on 22 February—and the Committee may remember we had significant flash flooding and other flooding around the Central Coast in particular. That also resulted in a fatality on the Thursday evening. The bureau's forecast to us on the Friday indicated that flood levels in Lismore, in particular on the Wilsons River, had peaked and were in fact forecast to drop. Moderate flooding was what was likely to occur in Lismore on the Friday afternoon.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: And that is why the ADF was told to go away at that point in time?

DANIEL AUSTIN: The ADF were not told to go away.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: They were told that they were not required to provide assistance.

DANIEL AUSTIN: I had a conversation with the Director-General Emergency Management Australia, who coordinates that discussion. At that point in time I provided him the briefing that we had received. That was that the situation was easing and that at that point in time the situation that the State faced was within hand for the State-based agencies. What eventuated on the Monday was not forecast at that point in time and, in fact, I would still say was not actually forecast even on the Sunday afternoon, when we held the press conference and when we tried to warn the community that there was more flooding coming across the State.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Okay, that happened. But my understanding is that Emergency Management Australia activated the Australian Government Disaster Response Plan at around 7.30 on 25 February and contacted New South Wales SES at around 9.30 p.m. to ask if defence presence would be required, and that was again rejected. Is that incorrect?

DANIEL AUSTIN: COMDISPLAN was activated also in relation to the situation in Queensland, not just within New South Wales. The situation in New South Wales at the time—

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Brisbane is not very far from the North Coast.

DANIEL AUSTIN: The situation was the COMDISPLAN was activated in relation to the events across Australia, not just within New South Wales, at that point in time.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: When we are talking about dropping the ball, it is a pretty critical issue. I know that there are a lot of things happening in real time, and we understand the issues around the different ways in which we are forecasting. But there is clearly a significant issue here given the outcome, where people were left on their roofs without the support they needed to evacuate. There were resources ready, willing and able, and SES basically turned those around on at least two occasions. Do you not think that is an issue?

DANIEL AUSTIN: If you look at what was forecast on the Sunday, we were looking at a river level of around 11.4 metres in Lismore. What occurred was a river level of 14.4 metres. That is three metres difference and, ultimately, that impacts significantly a different level of community. For 11.4 metres, I believe that we had mobilised resources. The resources across all agencies that were supporting were mobilised to deal with that. Additional resources were actually being mobilised as the situation deteriorated.

Ms STEPH COOKE: Ms Sharpe, perhaps Commissioner Fitzsimmons can elaborate further in relation to the ADF matter that you raise.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Yes, please.

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: The ADF liaison and engagement?

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Yes, because, again, there is confusion. There are media reports that suggest that they needed to go through you rather than the SES. I go back to the original review from 2017, which said that it was like *Yes Minister* or *Utopia* in terms of who is talking to who. I do not want to make light of that. The impact of this was that, as we know, citizens had to do their own rescues over days, not just on this day but over days.

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: I am happy to give you a summary of ADF engagement. As Mr Austin indicated, the ADF were present at weather briefings as early as Monday 21 February, which is standing routine arrangements with the SES as the lead agency concerning weather forecasts for the week ahead. Then, as the week came to an end on Thursday and Friday, as Mr Austin indicated, there were discussions with the ADF around what the forecast looked like, what was expected and whether there was any likelihood of engagement of resources at that stage. Based on the minor to moderate flood warning for the Northern Rivers, it was not anticipated that there would be a call for specialist resources. The liaison officer that was being offered at that time was also then, as I understand, to continue as usual because they had a pre-planned meeting to introduce themselves as new liaison on the Monday at the SES headquarters in any case.

Then on Sunday 27 February the SES activated what they call a DACC 1 request in Lismore for the ADF. That resulted in ADF deployment being affected in the area in a preparatory sense. I understand that was about 70 to 80 ADF personnel helping with doorknocking, sandbagging and those things based on the forecast and the preparatory work that was identified. On Monday 28 February, following the unpredicted and unprecedented consequences, a further DACC 2 request was submitted by the SES for rotary-wing support, 24-hour safe search and rescue capability—

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: But that was three days afterwards.

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: It was on Monday 28 February, Ms Sharpe.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Yes, so three days after the initial offer.

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: I am trying to go through it with you. I will repeat myself. The offer initially was for liaison at the head office and whether there was any likelihood of resources. Based on the forecast that was not deemed to be necessary, given the engagement to date and that the liaison was going to be attending on the Monday anyway for introduction. Then on Monday 28 February, following an unprecedented and unforecast event, a DACC 2 request was activated for that specialised resource, including high clearance vehicles, evacuation duties and general duties in sandbagging around Lismore.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: Mr Fitzsimmons, I want to repeat and refer to something earlier. In this case, who dropped the ball on the ADF?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: I am trying to explain. I do not believe the ball was dropped on the ADF.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: I think people on the North Coast would tell you otherwise.

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: I think, in hindsight, it would have been great to have all manner of additional things in place if there was a forecast that indicated what ultimately happened, but there was not a forecast that indicated what happened.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Who formally rejected the offer from the ADF? Was it the SES?

DANIEL AUSTIN: There was not a formal offer rejected.

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: There was no offer rejected.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: We will come back to this.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Good morning to all of you. I might start with you, Mr Fitzsimmons. In response to the Opposition's questions about the Government's response to the disastrous flood events in the north, you have mentioned a few times that this was unpredicted, unprecedented and unforecast. You said at one point that you were caught unawares.

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: I think everyone was.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: I accept that; however, climate science has been predicting for some time that these events will become more unpredictable, less easy to forecast and more severe. I understand that you may not have been prepared for this particular event at this particular time, but do you accept that you could have been more prepared to respond to unpredictable events when they come, given that we know that we are going to get less and less warning for them?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: I do not think there is any dispute anywhere that suggests that going forward we are going to continue to see more frequent and more intense weather events and that we are going to see extended and protracted disaster seasons, whether they be moisture deficit driven or driven by storms and big rainfall events. I think that is why, if I reflect on my time in different roles in New South Wales, we are seeing the State's emergency service agencies all benefiting from record budgets, record resources, adoption of policies that are seeking to anticipate and adjust strategies and resources to take advantage of shrinking windows of opportunity around mitigation and prevention activities.

It is one of the very reasons why the agency Resilience NSW was created following the 2020 bushfires, not only to look at leading the largest ever disaster recovery effort at the time with the bushfires but also in an acknowledgment by the Government that we needed to start looking at and partnering with our Federal counterparts around how we better anticipate and ready ourselves for an environment in the years ahead that is going to see more frequent and more intense weather events.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Commissioner, if I could just stop you there, it sounds like the Government has learnt the lessons from the bushfires, at least in theory.

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: I would say more than theory.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: And yet, in practice, we were unprepared for this event. Does that then mean that we need greater resources to be put into the emergency response in New South Wales?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: As I was saying earlier, one of the things that the Government has sought is what we are calling a State resilience strategy to start looking across the State with a consistent and objective methodology at what we are vulnerable and susceptible to. We know that we have got some underlying challenges in terms of historical demographic patterns, land use practices and those sorts of things. We want to understand what that vulnerability or susceptibility looks like and how we invest going forward, not just in readying ourselves for the event that is going to come but also in seeking to invest in low-cost, no-cost programs right through to significant investments to better prepare, seek to mitigate or prevent the impact of those disasters, natural or otherwise.

We have got a commitment to looking at the first draft of that in the middle of this year—although that has been challenged with the consultation we were planning to do with the disasters. But it is about looking forward. There is a very strong focus on learning lessons out of every event and out of every season to ensure that those lessons are embraced and taken up by the agencies and more broadly across government. We have contributed very much to State infrastructure and climate strategies and plans, recognising this sort of

environment. But, dare I say it, the very premise of your question reinforces that we are going to continue to see significant and more intense events.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: In that context, perhaps I will ask you, Minister, in the past three years I have sat in various estimates and asked various Ministers about their response to various crises, whether it is the bushfires, the COVID pandemic or the floods. I am told every time that this Government has been caught unawares, that this is a one-off, that it has not happened before and how could they possibly know? With respect, scientists have been telling us that all of these events are likely to occur and it is just a matter of when. Do you accept that the community is pretty fed up with hearing about words and plans and targets and not seeing any actual change on the ground?

Ms STEPH COOKE: I think it is important that we continue to learn from each and every natural disaster that occurs. The Bureau of Meteorology has done research to suggest that we are going to see intense bushfires going forward, and now we have seen this most recent rain and this unprecedented flooding. To think that what the Northern Rivers region saw by way of this flood was two metres beyond any previous record is simply extraordinary. The word that always comes to my mind is "unimaginable". Because it is not just two metres as you hold your hand up, it is two metres across an enormous and vast landscape. The local government areas impacted make up just on 28,000 square kilometres and whilst not all of them saw two metres higher, a lot of them did. That is an enormous area. It is a little over half the size of my own electorate, so it is enormous.

In my role as Minister I am determined to ensure that we push on with the reforms that we need to and that we continue investing in our emergency services. They have a record budget of \$1.9 billion in this year's budget. We need to push on, we need to do more for community preparedness and readiness, and we need to work with communities. I am heartened by the fact that with our bushfire independent inquiry we saw 76 recommendations come back. We have completed 39 per cent of them. The remainder are well in progress. We will push on through this.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Minister, you refer to the floods in the Northern Rivers as "unimaginable", but I put it to you that the climate scientists have been imagining this for decades. Just this week the IPCC released its final report to say that we are on track to increase our greenhouse emissions by 2030 as a globe and that we are very unlikely to cap now at 1.5 degrees of warming. Given just how dire things have become, will the Government now properly listen to that climate science and treat this as the climate emergency that it is?

Ms STEPH COOKE: I can speak for my own portfolio in terms of the emergency services and more recently in flood recovery, and I take it very seriously that we make sure that we are ready for the future. I think that there are four key areas that we need to focus on—the planning and the preparedness, the response and the recovery. We need to ensure that at every single stage of that continuum we have the right resources, the right funding, the right programs and the right relationships in place to make sure that our communities are ready and that they do have the level of confidence that they deserve to have in our emergency services, so that when these events do continue to happen—which I genuinely believe they will—we are there, we are ready to respond and we do everything that we can to minimise the impact on communities when it occurs. I think that is a whole-of-government approach. From my perspective as emergency services Minister, it is about ensuring that our various agencies that are sitting around the table today and the collectively 176,000 volunteers that sit behind these commissioners today have the resourcing that they need, that they are well trained and that we have enough of them. So recruitment and these sorts of things are really important to me as Minister.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: They are, and I agree with you. I just wish that it had been done a lot earlier. When we look at the series of events, the series of emergencies, that we have seen in the last three to five years, I put it to you that this is actually one emergency, it is the climate emergency and that we should be acting accordingly. Funding of \$1.9 billion is not going to cut it for an emergency this big. What are you doing to push for more funding, even if that means that we have people twiddling their thumbs waiting so that when we get another event like this we do not end up with people dying and losing their homes?

Ms STEPH COOKE: I have made it very clear publicly—the term I like to use is "tooth and nail"—I will fight tooth and nail to ensure that our emergency services agencies and organisations and all of the volunteers have the funding and the resources that they need to save lives and to keep our communities safe. I am certainly committed to that for as long as it takes.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: I just wanted to pick up on something that Acting Commissioner Austin mentioned during answers to the Opposition questions in relation to the Central Coast and the flash flooding that was seen there. I live on the Central Coast and as long as I have lived there we have had roads that go under water every time there is heavy rain. It is not a surprise to us when that happens, and I know that the Central Coast Council and the prior Gosford council had been provided with sea level rise risk analysis and basically been told

that they need to move a whole bunch of infrastructure higher up, including train lines and roads. But again nothing has been done for a long, long time. What is going to happen now to ensure that the Central Coast is flood-proof?

DANIEL AUSTIN: The work that the SES has been involved in with local government and others up there has been largely around the review of the flood plan and also flood classification work. They have recently seen some adjustments made to the trigger levels for warnings. There are also a number of community engagement and community capability activities that are undertaken through the Central Coast on a regular basis, and it has actually been something of a focus for us, at least over the last two or three years, to work on that. We sit with other organisations on the Local Emergency Management Committee around flood planning and other things that occur, and in fact I would say that council were one of the more vocal people when the amendments and the updates were made to the last edition of the flood plan. But SES does not own and operate the infrastructure, so the SES does not make the changes to the infrastructure. That is a question that needs to go to the relevant people.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: I will ask the Minister the same question then. This is just an example of an area where it is known that it is vulnerable in a flood and it has been asking for funding to protect infrastructure. Why hasn't that been done to date?

Ms STEPH COOKE: I will take that question on notice, if I could, Ms Boyd. But what I will say more broadly is that it is really important that the State Government, the Federal Government and local government work together to identify those vulnerable areas, vulnerable infrastructure and assets and that we work together through the emergency management arrangements that are in place to identify and then look to put plans in place and ultimately deliver that. Whether you want to refer to it as adaptation or preventative or resilience pieces, it is my view that it is really important that we continue to work toward that. The Local Emergency Management Committees are extremely important because that is where we get that grassroots, from-the-ground advice from people who are living and breathing it every day. It is really important, and to that end we have got the SES and we have got the RFS. I know that it came through in the bushfire inquiry—the importance of our agencies sitting on those committees so that we can get the best advice possible.

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: Can I just add something to that? I think the point you are raising is a good one because whilst predominantly the floodplain management work resides with council, there are a number of other mechanisms in place that support council with the sorts of things I think you are asking there. I do not know that anyone would be as bold as to say that we going to flood-proof an area but I know the point you are making, but there are mechanisms through the Commonwealth and the State governments. So DPE and the Feds provide a range of funding and technical support arrangements to assist council with that floodplain management work and the undertaking of works, including construction, that might assist with transport corridors or signage or whatever that mix might be, to get the range of treatments.

More broadly, picking up on the principle I think that you are raising, Ms Boyd, in a lot of areas, whether we look at it through a lens of vulnerability to flood or vulnerability to fire, us as white settlement in Australia probably did not learn a lot from our First Nations people in terms of where we sit in a static lifestyle and all those sorts of things. There is some real challenge there as a broader community—why are we surprised?—when we put ourselves in some of the most vulnerable or susceptible of locations, unlike our First Nations people, who were far more nomadic and seasonably based in terms of where a lot of their time was spent. There are a lot of inherent challenges there, but there is a very multi-layered approach to floodplain management investment in programs and technical and operational matters to address floodplain management.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Minister, are you aware that New South Wales is the only State or Territory in Australia not to have conducted a climate risk assessment of its State assets?

Ms STEPH COOKE: I think I would prefer to take that on notice, if I may, and provide the Committee with a comprehensive response.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Thank you. This is something that I also asked the Treasurer and a few others. It is a promise that the New South Wales Government made in 2016 after the Audit Office reported on the risk of not assessing the impact of climate change on State assets. We were promised that we would have that audit done by 2017. Here we are in 2022, and it has not been done. Do you accept that that makes it look very much like your Government is not taking climate change as seriously as it should be?

Ms STEPH COOKE: I think that we are taking very seriously the risks that are presented to our communities as a result of these events. It is demonstrated by the fact that we have set up inquiries after these major events have happened, whether it was the bushfire inquiry or now the flood inquiry. We have adopted all of the recommendations out of the bushfire inquiry. We have either completed or we have them in progress. We are going to do the same in response to the flood inquiry, depending on how that goes.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: That is a lot of words and promises, but your Government has not even done the work of working out which train lines will go underwater with sea level rise. It has done none of that work yet. How can the community look to the Government and think that it is going to take this climate emergency seriously enough?

Ms STEPH COOKE: I will take the specifics of your question on notice. However, it is incumbent upon us as government to keep learning and to keep doing what we can to make sure that our communities are prepared and that we do respond and ensure recovery happens in the best way, with the heart of our communities firmly in our focus.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: I find it is very difficult to learn a lesson if you do not accept that you have done the wrong thing in the first place. Do you accept that the Government has been woefully underprepared when it has come to these climate-driven crises over the past three to five years?

Ms STEPH COOKE: Ms Boyd, with all due respect, I have been in the portfolio now for just over 100 days. I will take your questions on notice and provide the Committee with some answers.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Thank you. How regularly does your department review climate projections?

Ms STEPH COOKE: I will take that question on notice.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Is there anyone else who can answer?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: I do not know about the department. If I reflect on just my last couple of decades, in particular the last 12 to 13 years, as commissioner with the RFS and now, what I would say is I cannot recall any business case or strategy proposition where climate change and forecasting is not factored into strategies, along with a number of other big strategic drivers that shape and form. Having reported then to Labor Ministers, Liberal Ministers and National Party Ministers, it has underpinned some of the biggest policy investments and resource configurations and those sorts of things over the last decade. It is a given inclusion into analysis and forecasting across the emergency management spectrum. We reflect that too through our national partnership arrangements through bodies like AFAC and the national research centre, where we have led all manner of investments around science and social interactions with that. That has had a direct correlation with changing things, like the way we even predict and measure conditions and weather and how we translate that to public information and warnings, how we confer that into resources and different strategies. So it underpins pretty much all the strategic contemplations.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Minister, Commissioner Fitzsimmons has said that the New South Wales Government did not drop the ball in relation to the flood response. Do you agree with that?

Ms STEPH COOKE: There is no doubt that communities right across New South Wales but particularly in the Northern Rivers region, as I think you and Mr Secord were referring to earlier, have endured an absolute battering over the past couple of months.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Sure, Minister. Everyone accepts that. The question specifically is that you as the Minister have seen how it has unfolded, and there are lots of lessons to be learned, but was the ball dropped in relation to the Northern Rivers?

Ms STEPH COOKE: I think this is a good opportunity for me to highlight the fact that the Premier—

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: No—

Ms STEPH COOKE: —has indicated that we have set up an inquiry to look into this flood event.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Sorry, I just really want to get a direct answer from you in relation to whether you believe the ball has been dropped. Yes, we know there is an inquiry, but Commissioner Fitzsimmons has said, "No, the ball wasn't dropped." What is your view?

Ms STEPH COOKE: My view is that all of our emergency services agencies have worked around the clock for months and months to keep our community safe and protected at this time. Everyone is doing their absolute best. There is no doubt that our communities have been very deeply impacted. I understand that there is anger and frustration in communities. People have lost their homes, their businesses and in some cases absolutely everything they have. I am not here to point fingers at our emergency services organisations.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: I am not asking that. Are you aware that the Premier apologised on behalf of the Government in relation to the response?

Ms STEPH COOKE: The Premier has indicated that the response was not perfect. I absolutely support those—

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: He went further than that. He apologised and said that it was unacceptable and that people should not have been left on their roofs. One of your commissioners has said this morning that the ball was not dropped. What is your view?

Ms STEPH COOKE: My view is that I will wait for the findings of the inquiry. I will continue as the Minister in this space to fight tooth and nail for all of the resources that our emergency services organisations need to do their job in the future. Given the opportunity, I will ensure any recommendations that are adopted by the Government following this inquiry, whatever they may be, are implemented in full for the benefit of our communities.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: Minister Cooke, I want to take you to an example that community members on the North Coast point to as an example of where the Government dropped the ball. I want to take you to 29 March to the evacuation of Lismore CBD. People were told to evacuate, then told to return. Will you concede that is an example of where the Government dropped the ball—telling people to evacuate, then telling them to go back, and then a second flood comes through? Can you take me through that?

Ms STEPH COOKE: I think the questions you are asking are of an operational nature.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: Madam, I think everyone would agree that this is an example where systems failed and the Government dropped the ball. Can you or the two gentlemen supporting you, either one of them, explain what happened when people were told to evacuate, then they were told it was safe to go back and it was not safe?

Ms STEPH COOKE: To that end, Mr Secord, I will ask Acting Commissioner Daniel Austin to initially answer your question and then Mr Fitzsimmons may have some comments to make further.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: Thank you, Minister.

DANIEL AUSTIN: In relation to that event, I think we need to peel back the specifics around what actually happened. What we were expecting was to see, once again, the Wilsons River rise to the point where it was going to overtop the levee and that would cause flooding of the CBD. And as that was coming up, then an evacuation order was issued in relation to the risk of the Wilsons River overtopping the levee and impacting the CBD. As the day went on, that risk, because of the conditions at the time, failed to materialise and, in fact, the renewed projection was somewhat below the top of the levee, at which point the decision was made that the risk posed by the overtopping of the levee by the Wilsons River no longer existed at that point in time.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: But, sir, between—

DANIEL AUSTIN: Can I finish that one first?

The Hon. WALT SECORD: Okay.

DANIEL AUSTIN: So at that point the evacuation order for the Lismore CBD was revoked. Later that evening, unforecast significant weather hit that area and flash flooding occurred in the CBD of Lismore.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: Sir, I do want to interrupt—

DANIEL AUSTIN: It was not until after that flash flooding had occurred that the Wilsons River later that morning finally overtopped the levee and came back up.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: Sir, there is an important point I want to make here. Between 1.00 p.m. and 3.25, the Wilsons River continued to rise. Did anyone not visually look at it and say, "Wait a second, the river's rising. Why are we telling people that it's safe?" Was not the most basic visual looking at the river, seeing that it was rising—what happened? Why did you tell people it was safe to go back when the river was rising?

DANIEL AUSTIN: Rivers will continue to rise depending on where the rainfall occurs and ultimately, with the forecasts and with the use of local knowledge and other things, it was agreed that there was no expectation for it to overtop the levee.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: But that is not what the Bureau of Meteorology was saying. The bureau was saying that there was a severe event coming again. The complete disconnect between this is just a mystery to me. How do you explain that? The SES makes the final call when there is conflicting information, is that right?

DANIEL AUSTIN: The information that we had that night was that, as I said, the Wilsons River would peak. I believe it was approximately a metre below the levee and, as I said, there was no longer a risk to the community from it overtopping. The flooding that occurred later that evening was not as a result of the Wilsons River overtopping the levee in the CBD.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Okay, but it flooded again and people had to leave at 3.00 a.m. when you told them they could go back. Can we talk about the issue on the Browns Creek pump station? My understanding is that Lismore SES said that it was reading 400 millimetres below what the actual level was. Is that correct?

DANIEL AUSTIN: I have heard those reports since, yes.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: Have you investigated those reports?

DANIEL AUSTIN: Not at this point in time, no, I have not.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: So we had the initial flood and a problem was reported. Are you saying that no action was taken from that first report?

DANIEL AUSTIN: I have only become aware of that in recent days when I read a media article that was provided to me. I had not seen that myself.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: Sir, what do you say to a tweet from a Channel 9 journalist on 28 February that says, "The rain gauge in Lismore is broken"?

DANIEL AUSTIN: I did not see that tweet.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: Are you aware that there were broken sirens, broken gauges? Is that why people were told that it was safe?

DANIEL AUSTIN: We acted with the information that we were given at the time and, as I said, I will continue to refer back to that answer of what was forecast and what we were being advised was likely to come. I need to make it clear though that the SES does not own the gauges and the SES does not own the pump stations. They are not owned by NSW SES.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Who are they owned by?

DANIEL AUSTIN: They are owned by a combination of owners, some being the Bureau of Meteorology, some being Lismore City Council, as I understand it, and potentially others as well. The SES does not own that infrastructure.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: There was a devastating flood four weeks ago and there was a report that one of the key gauges in relation to measuring the height is out by 400 millimetres. Do we know at any point whether the local SES picked that up and reported that in through your structures? We just spent 10 minutes this morning talking about all of the different groups that are doing all of this coordination and that it is all working, yet a critical gauge that is talking about the level of the water is broken and no-one seems to have actioned anything and nothing has come through this apparently very sophisticated coordination system.

DANIEL AUSTIN: I am aware from the Bureau of Meteorology that all the gauges were online. That is a conversation that I had because I was told that potentially a gauge was offline.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: When were you told that?

DANIEL AUSTIN: I would have to take that on notice and find the specifics, but—

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: If you could. It is very important. Again, it is about if the SES knows there is a problem, you may not be responsible for getting it fixed but what is your role in getting it fixed, given you are, as you have described, the lead agency who is in full control of what is going on?

DANIEL AUSTIN: As I said to you, I did raise that with the bureau and I was advised by the bureau that the gauges were online.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: Sir, okay, we have canvassed the water gauges. Now I want to take you to the sirens. Were the sirens working or not working?

DANIEL AUSTIN: As I understand it—

The Hon. WALT SECORD: Sir, a yes or no answer will be sufficient.

DANIEL AUSTIN: I have lost track of which date was which, but last week the siren which is on the Fire and Rescue NSW building was not operational because of the fact that that building was still suffering, and it would be appropriate for me to hand over to the acting commissioner in regard to the damage suffered on that building, but that building, like many other pieces of infrastructure in and around the city of Lismore, was still suffering damage from the previous flood event.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: Mr Austin, before you give it to your colleague, are sirens and water gauges fixed and working now so that if we have another incident the people can hear a siren, know that

information coming to them is correct and they should evacuate? Can you give a commitment today that the gauges are working and the sirens are working and if something happens in the next 24 hours that you will be ready?

DANIEL AUSTIN: In relation to the siren, the siren is not part of a formal warning process in and around the Lismore CBD.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: So what is its role?

The Hon. WALT SECORD: What is the siren for?

MEGAN STIFFLER: It is a fire station.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: I am sorry, sir, what is the siren for?

DANIEL AUSTIN: It is a fire station.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: Okay. Sorry, ma'am.

MEGAN STIFFLER: Thank you. The siren that is fitted to the facility in Lismore is not a current Fire and Rescue NSW procedure to use. It is currently only used as a memorial siren. It has been asked in the past by SES to be used as a warning system; however, the community—

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: So it has been used previously?

MEGAN STIFFLER: I believe so, yes.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: So the community are used to it being used when there is a flood coming? They would expect that—

MEGAN STIFFLER: I would not agree with that, Ms Sharpe. The challenge we have, unless it is a well-communicated system that all of community uses, we actually put community at risk by using a system that they are unaware of.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Sorry, the actual information from the SES—this specifically occurred—is that we have the issue that the evacuation order was listed, people went back in and then on 30 March there is important information: Lismore is overtopping, "The sirens will not sound due to a malfunction. Everyone must get out of the CBD immediately." It seems to me that you may not think that the community do not do it; the SES clearly does because it is using it in its communications. The other problem that we have is that a lot of mobile towers and telecommunications were knocked out at the time. Surely, if you have an alarm—it may not have always been used there—I cannot understand how you just decide that it is a useful optional extra in a circumstance where you need to tell everyone immediately to go. I just do not understand.

MEGAN STIFFLER: With the second flood, Ms Sharpe, our building was still without power. With all good intentions, we could not have activated that siren due to the conditions of Lismore at that time.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: But the SES relies on the malfunction. I do not understand it.

DANIEL AUSTIN: Can I also say that there were additional warnings and evacuations issued and there were also vehicles travelling around the streets, which were driving around with sirens going and warning people and doorknocking people to leave. Whilst it may well be a tool, the reality was that if it was going to sound, it was not going to sound until the actual levee was to overtop, by which point—the CBD was already flooding some time before that.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: I think the point we are trying to make is that it was malfunctioning and at no point was there any priority given to fixing it, knowing that it is not the silver bullet for everything but there were significant other problems that people had.

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: I think it was a city power supply issue. I think it was a supply issue to the general city area, was it not?

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: But is it just the power issue that is the malfunction or are there other issues with it?

MEGAN STIFFLER: I will take that on notice because I would like to get the current status of that siren for you.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: Sorry, ma'am, you do not know the current status of the siren?

MEGAN STIFFLER: I know that at the time it was spoken about in that tweet you referred to, we currently did not have power. I will confirm for you on notice, before the close of this session, its current status, if I could, Mr Secord.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: Do you not understand the frustration of the community that sirens did not work, gauges did not work, and now you are telling us today that you do not know if the siren—you have come to this inquiry—

MEGAN STIFFLER: I take my oath seriously that I gave this morning, sir, and want to provide you with the most accurate information. If you could give me the courtesy of taking it on notice, I will give that information to you as soon as possible.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: Minister Cooke, after reports of faulty gauges and a siren not working, did you raise it with your colleagues and your agencies that you are in charge of to say, "What happened? Did we drop the ball?" Did you follow that up when these reports came forward?

Ms STEPH COOKE: I talk to the commissioners regularly about the state of play, and I understand that Acting Commissioner Stiffler will take on notice your earlier questions. I was advised that the entire block where the Lismore Fire Station is located has been out of power since the first flood. That station was subsequently flooded in the second event that occurred. I happened to visit that station in the immediate aftermath of both floods, but particularly the second flood, and the damage to that building is absolutely extraordinary, like many buildings in the CBD. I am also advised that the siren is not formally part of any emergency management plan for Lismore.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Minister, it is our understanding—and maybe Acting Commissioner Austin can answer this—that the SES did actually make a request at some point that the siren be operational. Did that occur?

Ms STEPH COOKE: I will ask Acting Commissioner Austin to answer that question.

DANIEL AUSTIN: I would have to take that on notice as to what the specific local conversations were.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: That leads me to the next question. Minister, what is your role as the emergency services Minister in relation to this other structure? Who reports to you? Do all of you report directly and you coordinate all of that? Is that your role?

Ms STEPH COOKE: I am not quite sure what structure—

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: I am trying to understand what your—when the flooding was occurring, what were you doing?

Ms STEPH COOKE: It is my job as Minister to receive operational briefings from each of the agencies to ensure that our communities are as prepared as they can be under the circumstances. I am also trying to understand, are you referring to my role as emergency services Minister or as flood recovery Minister?

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: My understanding is that the law has not changed. Basically you have the same responsibilities; it is just that you have a new title. It does not really matter whether it is the Minister for Flood Recovery; it is that under the Act you still have the same role and that has not changed. Is that correct, Minister?

Ms STEPH COOKE: At the end of the day there is the SERM Act that governs what occurs in relation to floods, storms and tsunamis. Throughout the last several weeks I have spent a good deal of my time based out at SEOC, keeping across the crisis, receiving operational updates from predominantly the SES as the combat agency but also liaising with the other commissioners who are in support and bringing their organisational resources in support of the SES in response, and of course keeping the community updated, which is a pretty important thing to do at this time.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Minister, were you ever formally told that the sirens were not working, that the gauges were misreading and not giving the correct levels or that there were pumps that were not working? In any of that process, were you ever actually formally involved? Given that your role is to bring everyone together, and it is clear, even from today, that it is very delineated—very siloed some would suggest—in terms of who deals with what, your job is to come over the top of that, is it not? Were you ever told about these particular problems?

Ms STEPH COOKE: I will take that on notice, Ms Sharpe.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: You do not know whether you were told?

Ms STEPH COOKE: I will take that on notice, thank you.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Or were you told? Why can you not tell us why you were not told or if you were told?

Ms STEPH COOKE: It is my duty to ensure that the Committee is properly advised, and I will take that on notice, thank you.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Following on from that, what consideration have you given to establishing some sort of standing coordination agency to properly manage disaster recovery in New South Wales?

Ms STEPH COOKE: That is the role of Resilience NSW, Ms Boyd, and I will ask Commissioner Fitzsimmons to outline that a little further for you, please.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Yes. Could you explain how that works in this process then? From what I was hearing it is highly delineated. Is it the case then that you report, commissioner, to the Minister but it is your responsibility to coordinate the various agencies underneath? Is that correct?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: Correct. We have the primary legislation in New South Wales called the State Emergency and Rescue Management Act, or the SERM Act as it is commonly known. In the SERM Act, there is the provision for a SERCON, the State Emergency Recovery Controller. The provision in the SERM Act provides for that person to lead and coordinate recovery efforts from disaster—whole of coordination across government and non-government entities for recovery from disasters.

Yes, I report to the Minister and the Minister through to the Premier and Cabinet committees. We have a range of State arrangements where we pull together, for example, the State Recovery Committee, which comprises representative bodies and organisations. Under the current arrangement, I think we have ten focus areas—subcommittees of the State Recovery Committee—that are pulling together the collective effort across Commonwealth, State and non-government entities, including things like wellbeing and housing.

We have got animal and ag, we have got communications, we have got housing task forces, we have got infrastructure, we have got transport, we have got donations and partnerships. There is a whole range of areas that are coordinated and collaborated, and then through that effort we frame-up packages and submissions and work very closely with our Federal counterparts around disaster funding relief and recovery arrangements. In the last four to six weeks, we have seen something like \$2.5 billion announced in support packages already. I think, at the run rate that I saw yesterday, we probably have got over \$3 billion now—

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Sorry, just before you go much further, can I clarify though this is per disaster as opposed to—

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: We take a State lens. So, for example, given the scale and complexity of what has unfolded in the last six weeks or so, and remembering—and I am going to answer this question—leading up to the awful events of 28 February and subsequently in north-east New South Wales particularly, but not exclusively, we cannot forget the extraordinary implications for the Hawkesbury-Nepean, 12 months since the last major event, and other areas in between through the Central Coast and the Hunter and mid coast. But leading into that—leading into the end of 2021, beginning of 2022—we were up to something like 70 local government areas across the State that were declared natural disasters through storm and flood events so far this season, and then, the extraordinary rainfall events and flooding events of February and subsequently, we are now up to 60 discrete local government areas that have been declared natural disasters through that.

So whilst there are clear and unequivocal arrangements around leading the response effort, so too are there clear and unequivocal arrangements around leading the recovery effort now and going forward in the future. Recovery will take months and years, so the programs are designed not just for the immediacy of here and now, but what are the investments and the arrangements that are put in place going forward. With north-eastern New South Wales, as the State recovery controller I have appointed a regional recovery coordinator to take a discrete focus on a geographic area of the north-east of the State. We have identified another regional recovery coordinator to look after the Hawkesbury-Nepean, and then, given the scale, just one of our directors is working with local councils and authorities and partners between the Hunter and the Central Coast, for example.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Is there scope, though, for any of that coordination work to also be considering mitigation and adaptation? Is that part of—

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: It does. Well, historically speaking, as a nation, when we come to spending recovery funding and repairs and rebuilding, often it has been like for like. So what we have seen in more recent years, and particularly since the inception of our agency and the partnerships we have had with the Feds through the equivalent organisation that has been formed—the National Recovery and Resilience Agency—there is

government commitment at the Commonwealth and State level, and certainly desperate calling from the local level over the years, "How do we build back wiser and smarter?" So inherently in the recovery investments programs and spend, how are we factoring in betterment and adaptation? That, in turn, goes towards the mitigation and prevention side of things. So, for example, out of the bushfires, through setting new standards and agreements.

Historically speaking, we would have always—timber bridges burn in bushfires, and what do we do? We argue about putting a new bridge in place. Everyone would like to see a concrete or a steel one, but because we all fluff around and end up arguing over asset vesting and all that sort of stuff, hey presto, we build another timber bridge back and then wonder why it burns down next time. But, similarly, it does not afford any benefit to low to moderate flooding, which might be more the challenge in that area. So, out of the bushfires, all of the timber bridges are being replaced with more robust materials. We also saw the Government—

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Could I—

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: Sorry.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Sorry, it is quite a long answer. Could I ask you, though, if we are looking at how we do things better in the future, are there more powers or more people needed to be involved in this disaster recovery process to ensure that we mitigate, adapt and plan for the future more effectively?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: As the recovery controller, through to the Minister we have access to whoever and whatever we want in terms of effecting the best recovery arrangements that we can. But also—

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Do you think, though, that a whole-of-government response—

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: We are a whole-of-government response. We have got Planning, we have got Environment, we have got engineering, we have got Emergency Services, we have got welfare services, we have got housing authorities—we have got the whole-of-government effort collaborated under those arrangements. Then, particularly at the government level, the political level, the Minister collaborates and her team collaborates very closely with the political officers of all those relevant departments.

The other aspect to your question which is an important one, I believe, is that the State resilience strategy, the first iteration of that resilience strategy, is actually about laying the foundations for how, in a future-casting sense, do we look at what we are vulnerable and susceptible to? How do we start identifying now where investments and programs are best effected to deliver adaptation and prevention mitigation, resilience-sort-of-building for communities? Once we frame those—and we get the first iteration of that due this year, but we might have to revise that timing because of what has happened—but once we start mapping out, you know, one, five, 10-year times or more about the sorts of big investments that would be sensible to make, when we do get those disasters in the future we have got cogent, objective arguments around why that is the opportune time to invest now with what was on the agenda in the not too distant future. Let us integrate that investment around rebuild-repair, but significant adaptation and betterment.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Thank you.

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: Does that make sense?

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: It does, and it is very helpful. Minister, it sounds then, from the Commissioner's response to that question, that you have pretty much the most important portfolio in the Government. You have responsibility for a coordinating committee that is supposed to respond, adapt and mitigate to the biggest crisis of our lifetimes, being the climate emergency. Are you aware of that humungous responsibility that has been laid on your shoulders?

Ms STEPH COOKE: I am truly humbled and honoured to have been asked by the Premier and the Deputy Premier to serve initially as the Minister for Emergency Services and Resilience, and most recently as the Minister for Flood Recovery. It is a role I take extremely seriously. As I indicated earlier, I will continue to work very closely with the agencies within my portfolio, but right across government and with my colleagues in both the Cabinet and in the Government more broadly, and in fact colleagues right across the political divide, if that is what it is appropriate to call it. The one thing I would say about this event, as I reflect on the past few weeks, is the relationships that I have built with the member for Ballina, the member for Lismore, and my shadow in Mr Dib. It has been fantastic and it has not been politically motivated, which has been tremendous.

The one thing that we all bring to the table—and many others, not just those I have mentioned, but many others—is a desire to see things improve, a desire to see people get back on their feet really quickly, and a desire to prepare for the future. I take this role very seriously and I will continue to do the best job that I possibly can for the people of New South Wales and the people that have been impacted.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: So given that awareness of just how important your role is, and how important it is that we respond to these disasters as well as prepare better for them, do you think that there really should be a slightly different structure within government to prioritise these issues with, I guess, more of an official collaboration on climate change adaptation within the Government?

Ms STEPH COOKE: I am certainly, Ms Boyd, keeping a very open mind when it comes to the feedback of the inquiry that has been established recently with respect to this event. I think that process and any recommendations, combined with the recommendations and the report—the very extensive, 600-page report—in relation to the bushfire inquiry most recently, but also the other inputs from the Bureau of Meteorology and other reports that you have mentioned today, it is important to keep an open mind about how we can do things better as a government, and all of us as leaders, in relation to these things. So I am very much keeping an open mind.

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: I think it is fair to say too, Ms Boyd, that we have very much, particularly in the past 18 months or so, contributed to the State's climate strategy and the infrastructure strategy, which is looking at adaptation and resilience building into investment and into those strategies.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Minister, what are you doing to ensure that the planning rules properly reflect the risk of building on flood plains?

Ms STEPH COOKE: Ms Boyd, my present focus is ensuring that people, particularly those people in the Northern Rivers, have safe accommodation and that we keep the immediate focus on that recovery. Presently my time is dedicated to that, and I genuinely believe that your question is better directed to Minister Roberts in relation to planning.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: That is my point right there because you are the one who is responsible within this Government for coordinating the experts in this area who are going to tell us how we adapt, mitigate and respond to climate change disasters. Can you tell me whether you will be advocating to the planning Minister that we properly reflect the risk of bidding on flood plains within our planning rules?

Ms STEPH COOKE: There is no doubt that, as you would expect, we work together in this space and to that end. Of course there are terms of reference specifically in the inquiry that are dedicated to addressing the matters that you are talking about.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Will you be making representations to Minister Roberts in relation to ensuring that the planning rules actually take into account mitigation of and adaptation to climate change?

Ms STEPH COOKE: Should the inquiry make recommendations along those lines, I will absolutely take those positions forward.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: What do you say to the people who have been impacted by recent disasters when they say that this inquiry that has been established by the Government is just another excuse for the Government to hide behind instead of actually taking immediate action to do the things it now knows it should be doing?

Ms STEPH COOKE: What I would say to people who have been deeply impacted by this most recent disaster—I would say a couple of things. The first one is, yes, we absolutely recognise and I recognise as Minister—I have spent a considerable amount of time in the Northern Rivers region in particular but also in the Hawkesbury. I have been to the Central Coast. I have seen many communities that have been impacted, and I absolutely acknowledge their journey and how devastating it has been. That is the first thing I want to make absolutely clear.

The second thing is that these are ongoing conversations that we will continue to have within government. With respect to the inquiry, it is really important that we identify where we can improve, the things that we can do as a government and as a community more broadly, the things that we can do better into the future and the learnings that we need to take forward to improve things for future generations. I mean, I come from a small town myself, and it is really important that people in communities appreciate that their community has a future, that their children can choose to live, grow, remain, work and all of those things in those places.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Minister, that is why we are here asking these questions. It is why I am asking these questions. But the question to you is whether or not you would be making representations to Minister Roberts in relation to the planning rules. Your response to me was that you needed to wait for the inquiry. I put it to you that you do not need to wait for the inquiry—that some of these things are so obvious and so overdue that the actions should already have been taken. As the Minister responsible for, and pretty much our only hope in, mitigating and adapting to climate change, what are you doing to ensure that your colleagues are on the same page?

Ms STEPH COOKE: I continue to have conversations on a daily basis with my colleagues in relation to these matters, but also respecting that—and I know that you appreciate this more than anyone—they are complex matters. We do have people who have built on flood plains all over New South Wales, as an example. There are people in my own electorate who have built on flood plains.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Should they continue to build on flood plains?

Ms STEPH COOKE: I would like to see where the inquiry goes in that respect. But what I am getting at in relation to the complexity is that there are people who live there currently and that is their home. So we need to always bear in mind that when we are having these conversations, and we are looking to the future and how we can do things better, at the end of the day it is someone's home. They may have lived there for 40 or 50 or more years.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: That is right. We are dealing with two separate issues here. I have not got to the point of talking about relocation. I suspect that is a much bigger issue to talk about. What we are talking about here is planning rules that allow people to build new homes on flood plains or allow new developments to open up in places that we know are going to be disaster prone.

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: I understood, Ms Boyd, you cannot do it in a one-in-100 flood plain, for example. The Government already has that in place.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Yes. We can have another whole argument about one in 100.

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: But the question is do you go further? I think that is the point you are raising.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Yes.

The ACTING CHAIR: Particularly when you have had two one-in-500-year floods.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Sorry, I thought you were interrupting.

The ACTING CHAIR: I was mumbling.

Ms STEPH COOKE: In short, Ms Boyd, I will continue to work with Minister Roberts in relation to these matters and look forward to the process of the inquiry and any recommendations that result.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Commissioner Rogers, how much of the \$52 million raised by Celeste Barber's fundraiser has been spent by the RFS?

ROB ROGERS: I can tell you that almost all of the money has been allocated. If you just give me a moment—

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Could you also tell me what it has been spent on or allocated to?

ROB ROGERS: Yes, I am happy to go through that if I can just find the right bit of paper.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Can you tell me the difference between what has been allocated and what has actually been spent?

ROB ROGERS: Sure.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: I am happy for you to take that on notice, if you like. Minister, has that money been used to reduce government funding to the RFS?

ROB ROGERS: I am happy to answer that as well if you wish me to.

Ms STEPH COOKE: Yes, please, Commissioner.

ROB ROGERS: I can categorically say no. The agreement when those donations were made—and government was explicit about the fact that it was not to replace government expenditure. What it did help us to do, though, was to accelerate the rollout of some things. I will give you an example: helmets. We wanted a better standard of helmets and we wanted them out sooner, so we used that money to help roll out those helmets quicker. The ongoing replacement of those will come from normal government expenditure. There is a whole range of things, and I guess the premise of the use of that money has been that it has to be to the betterment of firefighters, not us as an agency, and certainly not replacing money that government would otherwise need to spend.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: I have run out of time, but I will come back to these questions in the next round.

The ACTING CHAIR: We will take the morning tea break and come back at 11.15 a.m.

(Short adjournment)

The ACTING CHAIR: It being 11.15 a.m., we will resume with questions from the Opposition.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: Thank you for your answers earlier. Minister, we had evidence this morning of broken sirens and faulty gauges. How many boats does Lismore SES have at the moment?

Ms STEPH COOKE: Thank you for that question, Mr Secord. That question is of an operational nature. I will certainly ask Acting Commissioner Daniel Austin to answer your question.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: Mr Austin, there was a discussion on 28 February and it was reported that Lismore SES only had two boats. How many boats does Lismore now have?

DANIEL AUSTIN: That report was incorrect. The total number of vehicles, vessels and trailers across the entirety of the Northern Rivers is 286. Within the Lismore City Unit there are three vehicles, nine boats and seven trailers, plus there were additional out-of-area crews in the area.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: On 28 February are you saying that Lismore had access to nine boats?

DANIEL AUSTIN: That is their standing capability.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: How many of them were operational on 28 February?

DANIEL AUSTIN: All of them, to my knowledge.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: All were being used?

DANIEL AUSTIN: I believe all the vehicles in the SES Lismore City Unit were operational at the time.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: Did you investigate claims by the mayor at the time? He told *ABC News Breakfast* on 28 February that Lismore SES only had two boats, and then later in the day the commissioner said there were seven.

DANIEL AUSTIN: I am aware that there were reports in the media because I also addressed those comments at the time.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: Whether it was two, seven or nine, why did the community have to rescue each other rather than relying on the SES?

DANIEL AUSTIN: If we connect the dots from earlier in the morning around the forecasting and what was presented in front of us, with a flood record of more than two metres at 14.4 metres, what we saw was that the total number of properties that were impacted by floodwaters in and around the Lismore CBD more than doubled. However, it is not so much the number of properties. It is in fact that because of the additional floodwater height, what we saw was that the number of people who were able to undertake self-refuge or stay in their properties—because they had constructed their properties to a level that was at or about the previous flood height in line with their building plans—those floodwaters took away that additional area of refuge. So whilst the total number grew, we are still doing some analysis around exactly what does that mean in terms of the total number of rescues that needed to be undertaken and how that would have vastly changed. As I say, it is as much to do with the additional height, which took away that refuge where people would have waited out floodwaters and where they have previously waited out floodwaters, but because of what was now a significantly higher point, that was no longer available to them.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: That was a very interesting answer but you did not talk about boats. Where does the mayor base the fact that there were only two boats in operation, or that there were seven or nine?

DANIEL AUSTIN: I am not aware. You would have to ask the mayor of Lismore where he got his information that he used because, as I have said to you, the standing capability of the Lismore City Unit is nine boats.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: You talk about capability, that is fine. You may have nine boats sitting over there. Let us backtrack a bit. Why were only two boats used?

DANIEL AUSTIN: I do not believe there were only two boats used. In fact, from the stories that I heard when I visited the unit, many of their members talk about being out on the water in our boats and using different boats for differing things and being out there and actually working side by side with the community to get into places and to effect rescues.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: Sir, members of the community reported evidence of people saving each other on surfboards and tinnies. What happened? Why did the SES not rescue people, not take boats out? They said there were only two in operation. You said there was a capacity of up to nine and that there were 286 of them across the North Coast.

DANIEL AUSTIN: I think I have addressed the fact that there were not two boats in operation. In regards to the total number of rescues and the like that occurred, the Lismore City Unit, supported by some additional flood rescue crews that were in the area, undertook many rescues over that 24-hour period. They worked side by side with members of the community because of what we saw being so much bigger and so much larger than what was the original forecasted height. Ultimately, I have heard stories from our members up there who literally spent hour upon hour going from property to property rescuing people, getting people off roofs and getting people out of houses. The volunteers, supported by the other emergency services, spent many hours putting their lives in danger as well to get to as many people as possible across the city of Lismore.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: Sir, you mentioned people on rooftops. Who had coordination of organising helicopters to rescue people and drop supplies? Who had coordination of that? Was it Resilience NSW? Was it the SES? Was it the Minister? Who had responsibility for rejecting or seeking helicopters?

DANIEL AUSTIN: We work collectively to engage helicopters. We move the sovereign fleet, for want of a better term, around the State to deal with the risk, and we pre-positioned a range of helicopters. We also asked for additional ADF helicopters to support our night-time capability as well. We work with the State Air Desk to ensure the appropriate helicopter with the appropriate skills and the appropriate capabilities.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Where does the State Air Desk sit? Who is in charge of that?

Ms STEPH COOKE: Commissioner Rogers.

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: But that is just a facilitation mechanism for the lead combat agency, Ms Sharpe.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: Who was in charge of helicopters?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: SES.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: We had documented cases and I have correspondence here from commercial organisations offering helicopters to the State. There is even a reference in the letter here that says, "The aircraft sat for six days without turning a blade." If you talk about coordination, again, this is another example of dropping the ball. Who was in charge of allocating or getting helicopters? I know the Premier said that some of the helicopters could not be used for rescue, that is fine. They could be used for food drops and they could be used for supply drops. How come the coordination was not undertaken in that area?

DANIEL AUSTIN: Helicopters were used where it was safe to do so. We also need to be aware that the conditions at times limited aircraft from flying. We did have times where aircraft were unable to get off the ground or where aircraft had to be relocated because of their base.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: Sir, respectfully, I saw footage from Channel 7, Channel 9, the ABC and Channel 10. Their helicopters could be there but you are saying that government helicopters could not be there? I remember, in fact, in response to a question that we put at a similar hearing, the Premier was forced to respond. So news crews could get around and fly around, but the State Government could not get helicopters to people on roofs?

DANIEL AUSTIN: I put to you that there is a significant difference of flying a helicopter to undertake news reporting than there is to undertake flood rescue operations. There was vision of highly trained personnel undertaking down-the-wire flood rescue activities that came exceptionally close to going horribly wrong. Yes, an aircraft may have been capable of flying to do a particular type of mission, but different aircraft do different types of missions. Ultimately, whilst there is a coordination element, there is also an element that says the air crew in charge of that aircraft have a level of responsibility for their own safety. So they will also make a level of call as to whether or not it is safe to fly. There were times when even the ADF aircraft were unable to fly because of the conditions that they were presented.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: One last question before I pass to my colleague the Hon. Penny Sharpe. Commissioner Fitzsimmons, Minister Cooke, broken gauges, no sirens, no boats, no helicopters. Will you now concede that the State Government dropped the ball? Mr Fitzsimmons, you have a chance to recant your evidence earlier this morning when you said twice that the State Government did not drop the ball. With all the evidence before us today—

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: With respect, I reject the premise of your question. I do not know that you are hearing what Mr Austin actually said. To suggest there was no helicopters is fundamentally flawed.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: I, in fact, received telephone calls from people on roofs, from their mobile phones, saying, "There's no-one up here to help us." There were no helicopters, no boats, broken sirens.

ROB ROGERS: Can I just clarify, RFS helicopters were there. We conducted a number of winches from Lismore. Indeed, over that February-March period some 75 people were winched from roofs from RFS-owned helicopters.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: Seventy-five. How many people were displaced?

ROB ROGERS: I cannot answer the—

The Hon. WALT SECORD: What is the figure?

ROB ROGERS: I do not know. I could not give—

The Hon. WALT SECORD: Minister, Mr Fitzsimmons, what is the number of people displaced on the North Coast?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: How many people required aerial extraction would be the comparator. There are thousands of people that have been displaced.

ROB ROGERS: If I could also just extend a little bit from what Mr Austin was saying. The helicopter extraction of people is not the first thing that we look for because it is inherently a dangerous thing to do. Quite often our helicopters were there and they would guide, for example, an SES boat or another agency boat to those people that are trapped and just try and make sure you connect those people and, where possible, put them in other means. I would suggest if you added those into it, there would be hundreds of people.

But I think the sheer volume of people that were in those areas, combined with the weather, combined with all those things, makes it really difficult to simply say, "We can get to every person at every time." It is a little like the fires, where—I am probably more familiar with—you cannot always get to every single person. They have to make do themselves, to help themselves, which is always what people do in disasters, and neighbours help other neighbours. The foundation of our agencies are about neighbourhoods helping neighbourhoods. So I do not think there is anything untoward with community members helping other community members. Indeed, I think those people should be congratulated for assisting their fellow community members, particularly at a peak of an activity. It is like saying you are going to get a fire truck to every home. You cannot. You do need that.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: Mr Rogers, all respect, all praise. We had the community saving each other. They were expecting the Government with the SES, Resilience NSW to be the people that they would turn to. Instead they turned to their neighbours to be saved. They are the heroes. I will give you that. But the question from my two visits up there, Where was the help from our Government? That was the question on everyone's lips.

MEGAN STIFFLER: Could I also add that Fire and Rescue NSW had 27 in-water technicians on the ground and we contributed to over 100 rescues as well. It was a combined effort across all of our agencies, having the right resources on the ground to assist as many as we could.

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: Except mine. As I have tried to articulate a few times this morning, we are not a response agency. So we were not involved in the response or the rescues of people.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Thank you, Minister, I want to ask you about accommodation. How many people in the Northern Rivers are being ordered out of their emergency accommodation to make way for Easter tourists?

Ms STEPH COOKE: The specific number I will take on notice. However, I do in answering your question acknowledge that this is a really difficult time for people who have been displaced as a result of this disaster. What I can say is that everyone who has required emergency accommodation has been looked after. I would—

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Yes, but we are about to move them on. You cannot tell me how many people you are moving?

Ms STEPH COOKE: We continue to work around the clock in relation to ensuring that people who have been displaced have a roof over their heads at this time. It is a very, very difficult time for the community and for those people, but our agencies are working together and we are doing everything we possibly can to look after people at this time.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: But you cannot tell me how many. How many people are still in evacuation centres?

Ms STEPH COOKE: I will ask Commissioner Fitzsimmons to perhaps answer that question. In relation to emergency accommodation more broadly, the last update I had was it was around about 1,500 people. But that is not—

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Is that different to evacuation centres?

Ms STEPH COOKE: Yes, it is. Yes, emergency accommodation is different from evacuation centres. I believe we have one evacuation centre still in operation at Lismore.

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: Correct.

Ms STEPH COOKE: That is correct. The emergency accommodation is where we, as a Government, look to place individuals and families in appropriate short-term accommodation, such as hotels, motels, executive apartments and the like. The last—

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: That is great but this is the point, even the people that have been able to secure that—I understand there are a lot of people at the Mantra in Ballina and other places—but they are all being moved out, aren't they? You can take it on notice.

Ms STEPH COOKE: Yes.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: I really just want to know how many people are in this situation and for how long and what is going the happen to them.

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: It is not as simple or as clinical as you might suggest. Since this event, the emergency housing providers through DCJ have provided emergency accommodation to more than 3½ thousand people. With some of the accommodation arrangements of the last week or so particularly, we have had to relocate people because of the follow-up rain and storm events and flooding, and—

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Is that the motorhomes that were on the flood plain that then had to be moved?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: There were some motorhomes that were relocated. There were also some other facilities, like government recreation facilities, that were affected by water as well, where people had to be relocated. The last update I had—there will be a further update provided today from our housing specialist. There were a few hundred, a couple of hundred to a few hundred people that were subject to momentary relocation as a result of Easter or school holidays and other—

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Momentary relocation? What is—

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: What I mean by that is where there are facilities that have been utilised to provide the emergency accommodation—generally motels, hotels, that sort of thing—if they have got longstanding bookings for other arrangements, like Easter or the school holidays or the festival, for example, that is coming up soon, people have booked some of those arrangements for a year or two in advance. So the housing providers will take people out of those. They are communicating with every single one of them. They are looking at relocating them. The last advice I got was about relocating some people as far as Grafton, Gold Coast and/or Brisbane for the duration of those prior bookings, with a view to then getting them back closer to their home base in that arrangement, if that makes sense, Ms Sharpe.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Thank you. Have all of the 40 motorhomes destined for Ballina made it there yet?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: I understood that all the motorhomes have been—I think there were 120 of them across a number of geographic areas. Did you say Casino then?

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: I am particularly asking about the 40 in Ballina.

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: Yes. I will take it on notice, but I am pretty sure Ballina did get the 40. We have also gone into another arrangement, in partnership with Red Cross and Camplify, where we can actually access further mobile home, motorhome, campervan sort of accommodation arrangements as well to support people in the interim.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Can you take on notice how many of those you have accessed? Surely they will have the same problem in terms of Easter and the holidays and the—

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: No, the last update on the motorhomes that we have brought into the region as of Monday's State Recovery Committee meeting was that all motorhomes were occupied, with one allocated and waiting for someone to occupy. They may have had a medical appointment or something, which is the only reason they were not in that facility, but I could be corrected. It was something like that, but it was certainly allocated to a needy individual.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Could we pick up where we left off in relation to the Celeste Barber fundraising money? That money came in 2020, about two years ago. It has been a long time for not all of it to have been spent yet. Do you have the figures on how much has actually been spent?

ROB ROGERS: Yeah, certainly. I will just say that part of us taking the time to do it—you would be aware that there were a number of court matters that had to be resolved about how that money could be spent before we could do that. There were additional funds beyond the money raised by Celeste Barber as well. We looked at it as a job lot. We have what we call a DGR trust who handles that—who are not actually the RFS, if you know what I mean. They are actually established and sit outside the RFS. But it has volunteers on it, so we have got people that know where these things should go and they are charged with expending that money. There is actually \$110 million in total of money that came in. Of that, \$108 million has been allocated. Of the \$108 million allocated, just over half of that money has actually been spent—gone out the door.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Okay, so about half of that is spent.

ROB ROGERS: Yes, and one that is probably a stand-out is \$10 million of that has been earmarked for the creation of a benevolent fund. The benevolent fund is intended to be an enduring fund that is there to look after the families of deceased and injured firefighters, beyond what government pays if that happens. This is things like kids' education, looking at families—very much like a legacy sort of arrangement. Things like that are ready to go, but we are just going through some formalities to establish that. But that sort of money is already earmarked for that.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: What has the actual expenditure been spent on? You were mentioning helmets.

ROB ROGERS: Yes, helmets. There are brigade grants, so \$20 million was to our brigades around the State, where they could apply for money for things around their station and equipment they thought they needed. There are district grants—another \$20 million—for the collective of brigades in local government areas or groups of local government areas for training facilities and things like that. I mentioned the helmets, and there is a scholarship fund. There is leadership training for volunteers. There are mobile data terminals for trucks to give them more live information in their fire trucks, so they can get better data to make sure they can keep safe. There is a whole range of that, and I am happy to put all that on notice, if you wish, to give you a fulsome answer.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: That would be very useful, thank you. A lot of that sounds like pretty essential stuff—the helmets, the brigade grants for essential equipment. Ordinarily, if we had not got that money in during the fundraising, would you have been requesting that money from the Government?

ROB ROGERS: At some point we probably would have tried to fund that, but I would not necessarily say all of it is for essential equipment. I will give you an example: It could be a concrete area that a brigade wanted at a station to do better training or something like that. It is not necessarily essential, but it is important to them, obviously, for their brigade and for their membership to make sure we can support them. There is a level of things, and that is what I said to you before. It is about things beyond what the Government money would do or accelerating something where we would have funded it but over a longer period of time.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: With the exception of the \$10 million that is earmarked to look after families, will the rest of it be spent ahead of the next fire season, or are there other parts of it that are sort of long-term allocations?

ROB ROGERS: No, I would be very confident that by the next fire season—I would be very surprised if there is much money left to be spent. There are orders in place and commitments in place for \$108 million out of \$110 million.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Thank you, that is useful to know. Can you tell me what workplace protections are currently in place for RFS volunteers in relation to bullying, sexual harassment, discrimination or other misconduct?

ROB ROGERS: We have a process in place where people can report grievances, cases of bullying and things like that—where people can actually raise that. They can raise it locally. If it is a serious matter, they can raise it to our professional standards unit, in which case it can be examined and appropriate action can be taken from there.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Are you aware of any complaints or grievances from RFS members regarding bullying, sexual harassment, discrimination or other misconduct that are currently being investigated by the police?

ROB ROGERS: I was aware there were some matters that were raised to former Minister Elliott. I recall one or two were referred to police, but I do not think any action was taken with them. If there is a matter

that crosses a criminal issue, we would always refer that to police. That would be the first thing we do, and any action we take would be subsequent to the police action.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Are you able to please take on notice how many complaints are currently being investigated by the police and what the general nature of the complaint is?

ROB ROGERS: What, the category of them?

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Yes, please.

ROB ROGERS: Certainly.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Thank you.

ROB ROGERS: For what I am aware of, yes.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Could you also tell me how many complaints or grievances from RFS members in relation to those matters—bullying, sexual harassment, discrimination or other misconduct—have previously been investigated by the police, and what were the findings or action taken in respect of those?

ROB ROGERS: Okay. If we have that information, I will give you what I can.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Regarding the Speak Up independent review process, which provides for members to seek an independent review of serious misconduct matters that they have reported in the past, can you tell me how many reviews have been requested? Do you have that data?

ROB ROGERS: I will get you the exact number, but I think it is in the order of between 30 and 40. That is my recollection of the last time I was given an update, unless something has come through since then.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Thank you. Could you take it on notice to check how many have been undertaken and what systemic findings have been made?

ROB ROGERS: Certainly.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Unless you can tell me that bit now?

ROB ROGERS: No, I do not have that. But what has led to us reviewing the entire system, which is what we have committed to do, was the fact that I was certainly concerned about the way some of the matters that we are handling at a more local level were handled. I do not think that some of our volunteers were treated fairly, and I do not think that the complaints they raised were taken as seriously as they ought to be. I made it my business to speak to a couple of female members of the RFS, and they were not treated appropriately at all. I found some of the ways they were treated were a bit dismissive—"That's just the way that person is" type of thing. We want to change that culture completely, which is why we are redesigning the entire process. For people who have gone through our system and have not found it useful or have found the system wanting, we are now in the process of designing a new system. We are talking to those people that have been through that process and asking for their input. We have also engaged a lady Dr Joy Townsend, who is a member of the RFS but is also a specialist in gender matters. She has been assisting the Australian military in trying to make sure that they become a more inclusive workplace. We also have her helping us in designing a better, more inclusive system.

One of the things I want to see out of this—I have been very open about the fact that I think we have to acknowledge that our system is antiquated and is certainly not contemporary. I have been very open with our membership that we have failed some people, and we need to fix that. That is why the Speak Up process is there: to try to catch those things where we have not done as well as we ought to have done historically, whilst at the same time redesigning a new system that will give people confidence in the way we go forward. Part of that is about not giving out details of what happened. When someone complains about something, we have traditionally kept it quiet. Even if you are the complainant, you cannot know what happened.

With modern ways of doing things, you need to be more open. People need to see what the result is and see that action has been taken in order to have confidence. So it is a whole body of work, I guess, and part of that is the Speak Up campaign. At the end of this calendar year we will launch the new system and that will be accompanied by a change in our values, a change in our code of conduct and some education for our people to understand what is and is not acceptable as far as behaviour is concerned. I am confident that that will give us back confidence in our discipline process.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: I understood that the RFS was considering those changes to the grievance and discipline handling process and it was to be in place by the beginning of 2022. Is that what you are referring to coming into place in 2023?

ROB ROGERS: The design of the system is to be in place, which is basically—we have got the bones of a system but what we want to do is test it with these people, which is what we are doing now. I guess, depending on what the view is that we get back from that membership as to whether we have hit the mark or not, we then want to put that out for broader consultation. I guess we could put a system out a lot quicker, but I just want to make sure that we are addressing the issues that people have historically raised. I do not want to just put something out and then someone says, "You haven't dealt with this or that." It is something we have not changed for a couple of decades, so I think it is important to get it right.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Has Clayton Utz been advising on that aspect of things? I know that they were paid close to \$3 million over a five-year period in relation to an independent review process. Was that in relation to that?

ROB ROGERS: No, that is not in relation to paying for that. Clayton Utz, along with other companies, will advise us on employment law, contractual law and a whole range of different legal processes. I do not believe that that would be accurate for that process at all. I am happy to get you the actual figures on what they have been paid for it.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: That would be very useful.

ROB ROGERS: But we have a range of people assisting us to develop a new system. I guess the outputs of what Clayton Utz are going through with that Speak Up process has to factor into that. If we did not look at that and take lessons from things that historically we may have got wrong, then we might miss something.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: If you could come back to me on notice with how much of that Clayton Utz spend, in total since it began, has been in relation to that process, that would be very useful, thank you.

ROB ROGERS: No problem.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: What is the total compensation that has been paid to RFS volunteers for complaints and grievances upheld? Are you able to give me that figure?

ROB ROGERS: I do not know that figure. I will just add on that issue, if I might, that the Clayton Utz process that they are going through also is quite independent. I actually wrote to Clayton Utz making sure that they understood that it is a completely independent process and no-one in the RFS can change that. I wanted to give that level of confidence to people that they could come through that process and feel confident that it is not just a proxy for RFS, if you know what I mean. As I say, I do have a letter to that end that I am happy to provide also, if that would give the Committee confidence.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: That would be very useful. Just a couple of final questions for you, Commissioner Rogers. In relation to the Rural Boundary Clearing Code, how are you monitoring that and what data gathering are you undertaking on how it is being used?

ROB ROGERS: By nature of the fact that it does not require any approvals, there is no way for us to monitor anything. What you are saying is that if you sit within a particular framework, then you are not required to follow the otherwise process, be it a development application or any other approval. By nature of people being able to self-check that, there is no way for us to monitor anything on that code, and that is the design of it. The whole design of it is to, I guess, let people who own land manage that land within certain parameters and without compromising the environment and the like. As far as the monitoring and enforcement, whoever is enforcing whatever legislation they are having that that is providing them a relief from, if they have not fulfilled the requirements of the code, then they are liable for whatever penalties they have if the code did not exist in the first place.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: But the RFS does not have any sort of data or oversight of that?

ROB ROGERS: No, we do not.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: I will go back to you, Commissioner Fitzsimmons. I have a few questions on the structure of Resilience NSW. What is the total number of staff members that you have now?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: Our agency headcount that was approved is just over 230. I will double check that. Our total agency headcount as at 4 April is 245.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: So 245 is the number of staff. Do you know what the full-time equivalent is for that?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: That includes ongoing staff, senior executives, temps and contractors.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: If we are looking at the different levels of staff, how many of them are at a senior executive level?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: There are currently 26, including myself.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: What is the total staffing cost per year?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: We have a budget allocation of labour and expenses and employee-related matters of \$38.5 million.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: How much of that is in relation to those 26 executives?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: I will take that on notice.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Thank you, that would be very useful. That is all I have for now. I will come back in the next round.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Minister, are you aware of the average response time to incidents for the fire brigade service?

Ms STEPH COOKE: That is an operational question, thank you, Mr Buttigieg. I will ask Acting Commissioner Stiffler to respond to your question.

MEGAN STIFFLER: Thank you, Mr Buttigieg. I will take that on notice. I am just getting our latest figures sent through to me. I will be able to give you a fulsome answer as soon as that comes through.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Could I have the average response times for 2021 and 2022?

MEGAN STIFFLER: Certainly.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Do we have a goal for that arrival at incident time?

MEGAN STIFFLER: Certainly. Across Australia, fire services have goals of response. We look at 50 percentile and 90 percentile response times. When I give you the figures that we are achieving, I will also give you those milestones that we are trying to achieve. You will get both.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: You cannot tell me now, Minister or Commissioner, what the goal or aim is for the fire service to respond to incidents? We do not have a goal at hand?

MEGAN STIFFLER: Give me one moment. My understanding is that there are a combination of factors that go into the response times, including traffic, roadworks and the nearest station. All of that is dynamically calculated through our communication centre computers and the fastest appliance with the right capability is chosen dynamically through that computer system.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Sure. But you could say here definitively that there is a goal that you set that you target for those. Given all those dynamics and the various circumstances and incidents, you do actually have goals that you target for responding to incidents?

MEGAN STIFFLER: There will be goals, sir. I do not have those—

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: There will be or there is?

MEGAN STIFFLER: There are. If you give me a moment to confirm those, I will make sure I give you a correct answer.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Can you tell me historically what those goals might have been going back, say, 15 or 20 years? Do you have any recollection of what we used to adhere to compared to what we are doing now?

MEGAN STIFFLER: Having joined New South Wales Fire and Rescue six months ago, I do not have that historical history, but again I will take that on notice.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Are you aware of your counterparts in Victoria—their thresholds and their requirements for incident response times? Are you aware of those criteria?

MEGAN STIFFLER: I have never worked for fire and rescue Victoria.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: No, but presumably you consult and have discussions with your counterparts in other jurisdictions to see how you are tracking, or does that not happen?

MEGAN STIFFLER: I think the industry does comparisons but, as I said, I do not work and I cannot control fire and rescue Victoria's response times, so it is not a figure that stays current to me.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Minister, you have not been briefed on any interjurisdictional regimes that target response times and what those thresholds are, and thought that we should at least be living up to that, or it is a comparison? That has not crossed your desk since you have become Minister?

Ms STEPH COOKE: Not to my knowledge, Mr Buttigieg. But our Fire and Rescue NSW is world leading in response to keeping our communities safe from fire and from natural disasters and other emergency incidents, as we have heard this morning in relation to the natural disasters that we are dealing with at the moment. Fire and Rescue has played an enormous role in respect of that, and it will continue to do so.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Minister, if it is world leading, how can you objectively make that statement and measure it if we do not even know what the response times are?

Ms STEPH COOKE: Response times are not the only measure of whether an organisation is world leading.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: No, but presumably they are quite a critical input to tell you how effectively your service is operating. I would have thought response to incidents like fires, floods and other calamities regarding expediency is one of the critical measures, would it not be?

MEGAN STIFFLER: Minister, I have some figures.

Ms STEPH COOKE: Thank you.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Thanks, Commissioner.

Ms STEPH COOKE: I would say it is not the only measure, Mr Buttigieg.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: No, what I was specifically asking was do you think as Minister it is a critical dataset to be across, or is it lower order?

Ms STEPH COOKE: It is an important measure, but as are the number of deaths related to fires, and taking into account property damage and property loss as well. To elaborate further I will now turn to Acting Commissioner Stiffler. Thank you.

MEGAN STIFFLER: Thank you, Minister. Mr Buttigieg, I have the latest figures that I can go through with you. You indicated first 2021. In major cities—would you like me to go through them in areas?

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: I think just to simplify it for the benefit of the Committee, could you just give me what our targets are first, if you have those at hand?

MEGAN STIFFLER: Sure. I have got actual figures here, Mr Buttigieg, if I could go through those first with you?

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Okay, sure.

MEGAN STIFFLER: I have a 50 percentile response time to structure fires. We average across the State 7.9 minutes.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: So in the 50 percentile of responses there is a 7.9-minute response to structural?

MEGAN STIFFLER: Correct. In the ninetieth percentile response time—and the figures I am quoting you include whether they are major cities, inner regional or outer regional. It is a collective. For the 90 percentile statewide there is a 15-minute response, again across all of those areas—major cities, inner regional, outer regional and remote.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Yes.

MEGAN STIFFLER: And those figures for remote have significant impact on the overall.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Sure. They drag the average.

MEGAN STIFFLER: They do.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: That is 2021 actual?

MEGAN STIFFLER: Correct.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Is there any other—

MEGAN STIFFLER: Certainly, what years would you like?

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: No. You said that was specifically for structural. What about just general response, medical or that sort of thing. Have you got those?

MEGAN STIFFLER: No, I do not, sir. I will have to take that on notice.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Okay. What about 2022?

MEGAN STIFFLER: That was the 2022 report which looks respectively on the year before. The next published report will be in February of 2023 which will address the 2022 response times.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: That was the actual or the lived experience, if you like. What about targets? We do not have those?

MEGAN STIFFLER: I do not have those before me, sir. I will take that on notice.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Okay. Minister, could I put to you that the Victorian targets are as follows, and I just want to get your response as to whether or not you think we should be looking to live up to those sorts of targets. They have a 7.7-minute deadline for structural fires; medical response is 9.2 minutes; fires in medium-density areas is 8 minutes; fires in low-density areas is 10 minutes; and fires in rural areas is 20 minutes. Do you think that would be an aspirational goal for New South Wales?

Ms STEPH COOKE: I will take that on notice, Mr Buttigieg.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: I am asking you as the Minister of the Crown responsible now for this area whether or not you think that the New South Wales jurisdiction should be at least living up to those sorts of standards. You do not have an opinion on that?

Ms STEPH COOKE: I would like to have all of the information in front of me before I provide an answer to you. That is why I am taking it on notice, thank you, Mr Buttigieg.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Would you be able to give us an answer some time today?

Ms STEPH COOKE: I will endeavour to do so.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Okay. Does it concern you that we do not have targets to hand in a hearing like this? It goes to those earlier questions I asked you about the criticality of that sort of dataset in knowing how well your service is performing. Given the calamities we have had over the last few years, I think the average person listening to this would think, "Goodness me, you would think that they would have at hand how quickly our fire service responds to incidents," would you not?

Ms STEPH COOKE: As I have already indicated, the response time is only one measure and, as for the rest of the questions that you have asked me, I will take them on notice and provide the Committee with a fulsome answer.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Do you think as Minister that there should be a minimum response time that the service guarantees or aspires to?

Ms STEPH COOKE: Once again I would like the opportunity to have all of the information in front of me, and I will take that question, along with the others, on notice.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Minister or perhaps Acting Commissioner, are there any actions that Fire and Rescue NSW is taking to improve response times in regional areas?

MEGAN STIFFLER: I think the issue that the Minister has spoken about is that response times make up one of our very important measures. If we look at the number of fatalities, injuries, property damage and the amount of fires that are kept to the room of origin, all of these things make up a successful response.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: No, Commissioner, I am sorry but the question was very specific. What actions, if any, is Fire and Rescue NSW taking to improve the response times in regional areas? It is a very straightforward question.

MEGAN STIFFLER: Certainly, Mr Buttigieg. We have a system in Fire and Rescue NSW which dynamically moves our resources around the State to ensure that the right resource for the right job is dispatched in the earliest amount of time. We work with technology, we work with recruitment and we analyse where growth corridors are and the impacts of traffic. All of those things are constantly analysed so we can ensure the best response available to the community.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: I understand that, Commissioner, but the question has nothing to do with the qualitative nature of the response, the variables, the circumstances and the dynamics. It is very simple.

Are you aware of any actions that Fire and Rescue NSW is taking to improve response times in regional areas? If the answer is no, that is fine.

MEGAN STIFFLER: I think I answered that, sir, by talking about using data to better place resources around the State based on incidents, the nature of the incidents, traffic build-up and development.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Is that in the form of an investment in technology to improve response times to be more specific?

MEGAN STIFFLER: We invest in our comms rooms on a regular basis. We are currently going through an upgrade to help with dispatch times as technology advances, but analysing data to understand the need of community is a really important aspect of providing response.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Minister, could I take you to the practice of TOLing? Are you aware of that acronym and what it means?

Ms STEPH COOKE: Yes, I am, Mr Buttigieg.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Could you give me your understanding of how it works?

Ms STEPH COOKE: Yes, I can. Fire and Rescue NSW uses a risk-based approach to manage the readiness for its emergency service delivery. Fire appliances are only taken offline when risk-based decision-making indicates it is safe to do so. The advice I have been provided is that these decisions are based on data, including ongoing incident response coverage of the area by other nearby appliances. TOLing is not used by Fire and Rescue NSW when it would place the community at risk. Fire and Rescue NSW's highly skilled firefighters provide rapid and reliable response to emergencies across the State 24/7, and each fire truck and its crew is a mobile resource available to respond whenever it is needed.

Fire and Rescue NSW's network of coverage is managed centrally from the communications centre and provides rapid emergency response, based on the fastest available resource, independent of a fixed fire station location. This means that the emergency coverage is always provided to the community, irrespective of fixed station locations. Under Fire and Rescue NSW's risk-based approach, an appliance is only taken offline when there are more than sufficient resources in the area to respond to emergencies.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Thank you, Minister. That is quite adequate. When we raised this in budget estimates last time, the question was put to the Minister about what cost-benefit analysis had been done as to the efficiency of the TOLing process. Presumably, you take a fire station offline. It comes with some sort of risk because you have less resources to deploy. The answer was that if we were going to do such a cost-benefit analysis on the financial implications, it would be too laborious and too much resource dedicated to it, so they had not actually done it. Is that your position as well, that there is no cost benefit analysis on TOLing?

Ms STEPH COOKE: The budget estimates that you refer to predates my time as Minister, and on that note I will ask Acting Commissioner Stiffler to make some comments.

MEGAN STIFFLER: Thank you. Since the last budget estimates, we have had an extensive review into the TOLing, conducted by the Industrial Relations Commission, to determine the validity of the policy. We have safety as our paramount in Fire and Rescue NSW. Using our network of coverage to manage centrally from our two comms centres provides us with that mobile network that the Minister refers to. We have been using the TOLing system since 2008 without issue. In 2019 the commissioner sought to increase the number of stations that could be TOLed, and in October 2019 the FBEU lodged a dispute with the Industrial Relations Commission.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Yes, I am aware of all that. I am specifically asking now: Has a cost-benefit analysis been done on the efficacy of TOLing?

MEGAN STIFFLER: Are you aware of the findings of the commission, Mr Buttigieg?

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: I am aware that the commission ruled that you could have those stations on the list, and it overruled the FBEU.

MEGAN STIFFLER: Commissioner Sloan was not persuaded that it had any material bearing on public safety, lives or property. Commissioner Sloan also stated that it would not expose firefighters to increased risk and that it did not present any basis for the IRC to interfere with the commissioner's exercise of powers under his Act.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Is the position of Fire and Rescue NSW that a cost-benefit analysis is not required in light of that ruling? Is that the position?

MEGAN STIFFLER: Not our position at all.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: So has a cost-benefit analysis been done or not? If not, will it be done?

MEGAN STIFFLER: We have calculated an estimated savings of approximately \$9.4 million over the life of the TOLing. That is based on several assumptions, including average figures for relief staffing of firefighters, firefighter ranks. This does not provide an accurate depiction of budgetary savings though, and the approximate comparative costs for salaries and wages for the same period does not provide the answer that you are looking for, I do not believe.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: So \$9.4 million over what period would that be? You said over the life. Is that since TOLing was introduced or FY?

MEGAN STIFFLER: One moment, please.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: That is okay. You can take that on notice if you like.

MEGAN STIFFLER: Thank you, Mr Buttigieg.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: I want to take you to a practical example of where TOLing may have become a problem, Minister. Are you aware of the recent woolshed fire at Wickham in Newcastle on 1 March? If I could walk you through the time line—and feel free to correct the record if I have made any errors here. There was an automatic fire alarm that went off at 2.37 on 1 March. The closest two appliances were at Carrington, which is three minutes away—this is in the Newcastle area obviously—and Newcastle itself, which is six minutes away. But Carrington was offline; it was on the TOLing list. The TOLing substitutes Carrington with Merewether.

At 14:43 Newcastle arrived first on the scene, which was some six minutes after the alarm, and at 14:47 Merewether arrived 10 minutes after the alarm was sounded. Merewether was the substitute for Carrington. Then at 14:50 Newcastle, who were on site, declared that there was actually a real fire and requested additional trucks, and then there were several appliances dispatched to the area, including Mayfield West and Lambton Alpha, which arrived 22 minutes and 23 minutes later, respectively.

The point of that little time line—and I can go over it again—is that as a result of the TOLing system, we had Carrington taken offline, who would have been able to respond in three minutes had they not been on the TOLing list. We have had evidence given to us that suggests that had Carrington got there, it could well have contributed significantly to the quelling of that fire much earlier. Do you accept that that is a practical problem of where TOLing just does not work?

MEGAN STIFFLER: Mr Buttigieg, if I could, firstly, a station may go offline for many reasons, whether it be training, operational deployment to other areas, injury, illness. There are a myriad of reasons a station is not available, including TOLing. With our dynamic dispatch, we constantly reassess where appliances are to provide coverage. I will take on notice this particular instance. However, I will suggest to look at a complex building site, such as the one that you have mentioned, with historical risks, it is very difficult to judge different actions having impact, so I will take it on notice.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: That is all very well, Commissioner. Minister, this is perhaps best directed to you, but I am obviously happy for the commissioner to supplement. You have a person like businesswoman Kate Warner, who lost \$40,000 worth of vintage clothing and textile equipment. That potentially could have been avoided had this station not been taken offline. Let us not forget that because of that decision to TOL, it was not just Carrington. Theoretically, under that TOLing list now, with the decision to add 30 new stations, we could now see the Swansea, Carrington, Teralba, Merewether and Lambton stations offline all at once, as well as tankers from Cardiff, Tingira Heights and Charlestown. Now you will say that that just will not happen because of the dynamic data arrangement of resourcing.

MEGAN STIFFLER: And the risk assessment.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: But I am giving you a practical example of where Carrington was taken offline and a resource that could have been deployed in three minutes was not deployed because of TOLing, and this lady, this businessperson, has lost \$40,000 worth of stock. That is just one example of the fallout. Minister, as a Minister of the Crown, does TOLing concern you as an ongoing policy, given what we have just heard?

Ms STEPH COOKE: Thank you, Mr Buttigieg. Firstly, I would like to acknowledge any businessperson who loses their stock, their fittings, their premises or any part of their business due to a fire or any other event, it is really difficult. As a former small business person myself, I can understand how heartbreaking that would be. I think in relation to TOLing, I would again refer back to Acting Commissioner Stiffler, who was endeavouring to answer your questions, and anything that she is unable to answer I am more than happy to take on notice and provide you with a comprehensive answer.

MEGAN STIFFLER: Thank you, Minister. I think context is really important here, Mr Buttigieg. You speak of Carrington, which is a retained fire station. They are never expected to be able to turn out in three minutes due to their paging system. Newcastle will always be a quicker response, which is a fully-crewed 24/7 station. So when you talk about TOLing, part of our risk assessment is to understand response times of retained fire stations and what is the full-time permanent support that surrounds those. So again, you have pulled out certain details of this particular job that I think we need to put in context. And, as the Minister has indicated, there was significant loss in that particular building due to its previous use of being a wool store. It is a highly flammable building type and I think we need to just put in context around the available response time of the station you have highlighted compared with the full-time fire station that was available and fully operational.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Can I ask you, in terms of Teralba, was that offline as well?

MEGAN STIFFLER: I would have to take that on notice, sir. I do not have that before me.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Can I take you to perhaps another practical example then. Minister, at the end of the day, let's be frank here, this is about whether or not you as a Minister are comfortable with this process of TOLing because the statement was that nothing actually gets sacrificed, there is no downside risk, it is an efficient process which allocates resources according to need, but I am giving you practical examples of where this could be a problem and I want to know if you are comfortable with it, so let me give you another one. We will take the situation of Glenbrook, which is in the lower Blue Mountains. Glenbrook is taken offline and, depending on where the fire is, the next nearest fire stations are Regentville, Penrith and Cranebrook. Glenbrook is—and this goes to your earlier point, Commissioner—a retained fire station. Is that correct?

MEGAN STIFFLER: I think so, sir. I do not know my 334 stations off the top of my head.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Okay. My understanding is it is. Do we know what the average response time would be if Glenbrook fire station were called out to respond to a fire in its area?

MEGAN STIFFLER: Again, with such a complex network of resourcing I would have to take that on notice to see what the average response times are. I think when you are posing a question about whether it is a safe process, the independent IRC looked at this process and Commissioner Sloan stated:

I am not persuaded that to the extent that the Proposed In Order might increase response times, it would have a material bearing on public safety, either in terms of lives or property lost.

And that is from an independent body where we gave hours of evidence detailing all the sorts of questions that you are putting before us, and, independently, Commissioner Sloan has made that finding. I can provide the full report to you, sir.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Yes, I understand the role of the Industrial Relations Commission: Their role is to broker industrial disputes between employers and employees. But I am asking you specifically now about concrete examples and whether or not the service is comfortable with it. So if we go back to this Glenbrook example, 10 minutes away is the next station, Regentville. Does that mean that if Glenbrook is taken offline you theoretically add another 10 minutes to the response time?

MEGAN STIFFLER: I think what you are doing is looking at our capability and response in a bricks-and-mortar context. When we use our dispatch systems it also takes into account our ability to track through AVL where a particular appliance is.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Could you articulate that acronym?

MEGAN STIFFLER: Sorry, it is automated vehicle location. Our computer system can understand our complex network of vehicles and their capability. If we go back to old traditions where we look at a fire truck being in a station, a bricks-and-mortar model, then, taking appliances offline, you could then compare where one station is to another. With our system, we can—

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Hang on a minute. Normally you would have appliances at stations, would you not? They are just not randomly lying around streets, are they?

MEGAN STIFFLER: We do education with community, we do inspections of buildings, we do training. We are a mobile resource, and what our computer system allows us to do is dynamically see where all those resources are, and should an area indicate that there are no appliances within a reasonable amount of time, we will move our appliances around dynamically throughout the whole of New South Wales.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Minister, if I am a resident of the Blue Mountains listening to this and I am hearing this and it is put to me that Glenbrook is taken offline and the next closest is Regentville, which is 10 minutes away, I am thinking to myself: The reality is it is going to increase the response time by 10 minutes. Now you are saying that is not the case.

MEGAN STIFFLER: When you have got a dynamic resource—

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: "Dynamic resource" meaning what? There is some appliance sitting between Regentville and Glenbrook, which—

MEGAN STIFFLER: We can identify where all our resources are at any given time. The other benefit to our community—

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: So the proposition is that there could be appliances anywhere you could call on that are not necessarily located in stations, therefore it is all okay?

MEGAN STIFFLER: No. What I was saying is we are able through our computer system, Mr Buttigieg, to put the right appliance at the right time and we can also work with RFS. We are currently both progressing to a vision 5 automated CAD system where we can dispatch resources. So we have got availability of a whole network of appliances to help our community, and I think our community of the Blue Mountains or anywhere in New South Wales would want the latest technology to ensure the quickest appliance with the right equipment is dispatched at any given time.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Sure, but I think the taxpaying people of New South Wales who have been exposed to any number of incidents over the last couple of years would also think, "Hang on a minute, there is only so much you can do with technology if you have got a limited envelope of resources". It cannot be infinite, we understand that, but the question is: If you are downgrading your human resource in favour of a technological fix, is that good enough? Your response was that the IRC said it is all okay. If that is your response, that is fine. I am prepared to accept that as evidence.

MEGAN STIFFLER: I think it is not a net zero game here, a net sum game. What we are saying is we have got technology to help us be the most responsive urban fire service. We will use that technology to ensure, as I said, the quickest, most capable appliance is dispatched.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Could I take you to another practical example we raised last time in budget estimates whereby we had the spectre of Bundeena being offline and then Helensburgh and Scarborough stations as well, all of which are on the list and could be offline as well? So you could have a situation where all three stations fell below four, in which case they go on the list, and then the nearest response would be Sutherland or Revesby. Could you update the Committee on the latest response configurations for those stations in that event?

MEGAN STIFFLER: What I can tell you, Mr Buttigieg, is Bundeena would always get what we call a move-up. When we do our risk assessment with regards to tolling, we look at stations where we move appliances up into that area to ensure coverage.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Move appliances from, what, presumably Sutherland or Revesby if those other stations are offline?

MEGAN STIFFLER: Again, we use the computer system to allow us to dynamically move up appliances.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Are you not robbing Peter to pay Paul then? It has got to come from somewhere, which means that particular area is then short.

MEGAN STIFFLER: Some stations where we do move-ups can have multiple appliances available to them, Mr Buttigieg.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: So there would never be a situation where you would actually under-resource the area where you are taking the appliance from as a result?

MEGAN STIFFLER: What I would say to you is the risk analysis that is done looks at the frequency of jobs for an area, the response capability within that area.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: The risk analysis is an interesting word because it implies you have done a risk analysis and there is some downside risk but the risk is acceptable. Is that the position, Minister?

Ms STEPH COOKE: I have been listening to the exchange that has occurred, and, Mr Buttigieg, I do not have all of the details of the individual cases that you have raised today—and there has been a series of them. On that basis, without all of the information in front of me, I cannot comment on specific examples, but I am happy to take any of your specific questions on notice and come back to you with a fulsome answer.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Minister, does Fire and Rescue NSW intend on permanently closing any fire stations over the next 18 months?

Ms STEPH COOKE: No.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: No? Thank you. Now that the IRC decision has been handed down, do you intend to remove any stations from the current TOLing list or is that staying how it is?

MEGAN STIFFLER: Minister?

Ms STEPH COOKE: Please, Commissioner, thank you.

MEGAN STIFFLER: At 2019, we are up to 56 and that includes removing some of the original list while we were adding another 32. With the 56 that is now endorsed by the IRC as being safe practice, we removed some off the list and added, in answer to your question.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Have you done analysis on whether or not there are enough firefighters in New South Wales given—and this relates to my colleague Abigail Boyd's question before about the increasing risk of fire in New South Wales. In other words, has there been an analysis done of the likely increase in risk compared to the resources you have to deploy? I guess the short way of asking that is: Do we need more firefighters or not?

MEGAN STIFFLER: You spoke of risk analysis. When we look at population growth, we look at types of fires and emerging technologies. We constantly review not only our appliances and capabilities but also the number of persons required to fulfil those duties. We believe that with the right equipment, the latest appliances or fire trucks, we can offer capacity and capability to our current community needs.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: There is no deficit in firefighters at the moment?

MEGAN STIFFLER: We are currently, as you would be aware, going through our policy with regard to vaccinations, and we have been maintaining our capacity and our capability whilst we are doing that with our workforce.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: There are no recruitment drives that have been undertaken in the past 12 months?

MEGAN STIFFLER: We currently have open recruitment, which is a regular occurrence within Fire and Rescue. Currently, a campaign is open.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Can you tell me how many retained firefighters there are in New South Wales?

MEGAN STIFFLER: Just one moment. I am just getting those figures for you now. Currently we have 3,317 on-call or retained firefighters, and that is an increase of 20 from the 2019-20 figures.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Can you tell us how much they are paid or what their retainer is?

MEGAN STIFFLER: I do not have that before me, sir.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: That is okay. Take it on notice.

MEGAN STIFFLER: On notice.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: That is fine.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: Minister, I was up on the North Coast on 27 March and I had a tour of the CBD, and at the time it was almost four weeks that they had been without electricity. Has electricity been restored to the Lismore CBD?

Ms STEPH COOKE: I will take your question on notice specifically, Mr Secord, but—I am sorry, actually, I have an update for you, miraculously.

The ACTING CHAIR: Fast-breaking news.

Ms STEPH COOKE: I was actually going to comment that I have met with the senior leaders of Essential Energy, and I must say that they have worked incredibly hard alongside the community as quickly as possible to restore power to areas up there. I will specifically answer your question by saying that progress has been made right across the North Coast, particularly in recent days, and we have been able to restore power to much of the network. Teams are currently, as we speak, working across the Lismore CBD to finalise repairs to the overhead low-voltage network, which was deeply impacted by that flooding event. Weather permitting, this work should be completed before Easter, with business customers able to reconnect to the network following an inspection of their premises to ensure that it is safe for that restoration to occur. Underground crews are also working. We have had some significant damage done in that respect and they are both in Molesworth Street, in particular, this week and at the airport. As I have indicated, significant damage was done to that infrastructure and we are working on it as quickly as we can.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: Minister, when you met with Essential Energy did you express to them that being without electricity for four weeks is unacceptable? I spoke to businesses and they were paying between \$110 to \$120 a day for generators so they could continue to operate, or at least clean out their premises. Did you ask Essential Energy why it took four weeks? Your concession today is that there are still parts of the city that still do not have electricity and you expect to have it by next weekend. Did you ask them why it has taken so long?

Ms STEPH COOKE: We did talk about the length of time that it does take to reconnect. The bottom line is that the event was of such a significant and catastrophic nature and over a widespread area, not just the Lismore CBD but obviously north and south Lismore and well beyond that. As I indicated in an earlier response today, we have local government areas totalling 28,000 square kilometres impacted by this event. The sheer size and enormity of both the event and the response required means that Essential Energy have honestly been pulling out all stops. They have had as many crews out as possible. We had the first event, with a lot of the work being able to be completed, but then the second event has come through and has impacted areas again. Having said that, to answer your question, yes, I continue to impress upon Essential Energy and all services to make sure that we can get people back on their feet as quickly as possible.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: Mr Fitzsimmons, from your experience, is it acceptable or is it expected to be six to eight weeks without electricity after a natural event?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: It can be, I think is the simple answer, Mr Secord, and I think the complexity and the safety implications for re-energising communities and networks was also a key consideration up there. The scale and magnitude of damage, as the Minister said, really provided some serious challenges, and there is no doubt that the energy providers across all of our significantly impacted storm and flood areas have done, in my view, remarkably well to restore as much as they did in the time they did. That is absolutely cold comfort to those who are still waiting on power supplies, but through the State's SEOC we actually have the energy and utility's functional area of government present and we chase down and monitor and track as closely as we can with respective energy providers what progress is occurring, what the challenges are and what other interventions can be put into place to help alleviate.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: On that note, sir, after six to eight weeks, do you not think this is another case of dropping the ball? With four, five or six weeks without electricity for businesses, did it not occur to you that maybe you should provide generators or provide assistance to businesses in the area?

They had to provide it themselves, at \$110 to \$120 a day. When did it occur that maybe you should do something six to eight weeks after the event?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: I think the assumption is that it was not occurring. Generators and other provisions were being provided to people. Yes, people did their own thing as well. That is an absolute fact. But let us not ignore the fact that in that six-to-eight-week period—particularly with Lismore, the deflation that occurred with the impact a second time round, around almost four weeks to the day, 28 February to 28 March—a whole area that was getting close to being fully restored was completely inundated and damaged again, so it was a significant setback. I cannot move past the fact that there are things that are occurring beyond the control of everybody that have compounded the challenges in northern New South Wales.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: Okay. One last question. But this happened in 2017—

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: A flood happened in 2017, yes.

The ACTING CHAIR: It was a pretty bad flood.

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: It was a significant flood in 2017. But this was, again, of an order and magnitude not like 2017.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: But when is the Government going to start learning lessons from these incidents? We had two events, and then 2017—almost to the anniversary of it. I just think that is extraordinary. So, yes, you have a layer of bureaucracy that you have created and you have people who are doing—

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: Sorry, what do you mean by that?

The Hon. WALT SECORD: Well, your organisation that you have, you are creating strategic plans now. But when are you actually going to provide assistance to the community—practical, physical assistance? We are at five, six weeks after a flood. There is no electricity in parts of Lismore still.

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: Let me just rewind a little there. I have not created anything. The Government created Resilience NSW—

The Hon. WALT SECORD: But you are in charge of this organisation?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: I will answer the question. The Government created Resilience NSW. We assumed all the roles and functions of the former OEM, so it is not a new concept. It is not a layer of bureaucracy that interferes; it is designed to actually provide a more streamlined and coordinated approach to pulling together the State's entire efforts in relation to recovery. The reality is that the dislocation and damage that have been occasioned, particularly to the poor people of north-east New South Wales, with subsequent events within a matter of four weeks of one another, have really compromised the ability for things like energy. Indeed, dare I say it, some of the telecommunications were out for periods of time as well, to varying degrees of complexity—some aerial interference, as in, towers and things, and then there were other things where there is a lot of configuration around pits and whatever to connect networks together.

But the other inference which I do not support is the suggestion that lessons are not learnt. Lessons are indeed learnt after every event, after every season. There is a deliberateness to seek to learn lessons around how things can be applied and done differently into the future, and the suggestion that it has not been, I think, is not fair. And because it takes six weeks or so to get electricity back into some parts, I think, is more reflective of the extraordinary environment and implications of the disaster, more than the effort and the resources being applied to do so.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: Thank you.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Just as a follow-up to that, other distributors are often used when there is a problem. Did that happen last time?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: What do you mean by that, sorry, Ms Sharpe?

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: My question is whether you asked for other help from Ausgrid or Endeavour in relation to getting energy back online?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: Through what we call the Energy and Utility Services Functional Area Coordinator—the EUSFAC—power companies routinely, in disasters and post-disasters, utilise resources from one another, particularly where there is a concentration of effort required somewhere geographically in New South Wales.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Did that happen in this situation?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: I can take that on notice, but I am—

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: You do not know?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: I am pretty confident that that would have occurred.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: But as a coordinating layer, is it not your job to ask whether or not those resources were requested? Do you just leave it up to the individual electricity companies to sort it out, do you?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: The Energy and Utility Services Functional Area of government, operating out of the SEOC, coordinates those agencies. If an energy utility requires those resources then, yes, absolutely, they coordinate and integrate those.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: Why did it not happen then? Why is the electricity still off, sir?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: I do not know how I can repeat that any more, Mr Secord.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: But that is what people are telling us. Sir, it has been almost six to seven weeks and there are still businesses without electricity on.

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: Correct.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: That is not fair, sir. Come on.

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: I think the Minister has given a pretty comprehensive update as to where the energy companies are up to, and whilst it is cold comfort for several hundred locations in the town centre of Lismore, it is a reality, whether we like to accept it or not, that the entire town went back under water only a matter of a week or so ago.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: But, Commissioner, are you aware of whether or not Essential requested Ausgrid or Endeavour?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: I will clarify that for you and get you some information back to you.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: I think it is astounding that the coordinating body for disaster response does not even know whether or not other distributors were asked for help, given we have had—

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: Mr Buttigieg, I am sorry, I do not know how many—

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: We have had people without power for six weeks and you cannot even tell us whether or not other distributors were called on?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: Mr Buttigieg, I do not know how many times I have got to say this to you: We are not the agency that leads disaster response—ad nauseam, I will say it.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: So you cannot pick up the phone and say—

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: So is that the SES's job?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: No.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Well, whose job was it then?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: SES lead the combat agencies. The emergency—

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Yes. So whose job was it to pick up the phone to the other—

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: The emergency operations are all co-located in the SEOC, including the energy authorities, and that is what the SEOCON does, to ensure that combined effort is brought together. Absolutely, we will get involved and work with those partner entities and organisations in the recovery phase.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Okay, thank you. Minister, we only have four minutes left. You were appointed as the Minister for Flood Recovery on 4 March. Is that correct?

Ms STEPH COOKE: I believe that was the date, Ms Sharpe, thank you.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: The role that you actually took on is exactly the same as the role that you had previously. What is different, other than the title?

Ms STEPH COOKE: Well, it is my responsibility to oversee the multiagency response, and given the size and scale of the event that we have seen—and, once again, there has been a lot of talk about the Northern Rivers region, particularly Lismore, today and I can completely understand that because they have experienced the full brunt of it, but—

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: That is true. Minister, in the last little bit of time we have, I am just trying to understand—and just to be clear—your legal responsibilities are no different now in terms of the allocation of Acts than they were prior to being given this title?

Ms STEPH COOKE: The important job that I have as flood recovery Minister is to ensure that the clean-up, the rebuilding, the support programs all have the attention of the Government, that all agencies are working together to make sure that the process is well funded, that we act swiftly, and from a ministerial perspective that I work with my ministerial colleagues to coordinate the multiagency response for not just that area—which is where I was going with it—but in every city and every town that has been impacted by this most recent event.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Sure. That is fine. Have you received any additional staff in your office to assist you with this role?

Ms STEPH COOKE: No.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: So you are doing it within what you were doing before and, essentially, it is the same job that you had but it is a new title? I understand what the role is. But the Minister for Flood Recovery has no more resources than you had previously and, essentially, you are working under the same legislative framework. That is correct, is it not?

Ms STEPH COOKE: Yes, I have responsibility for the same Acts as prior to the most recent appointment as Minister for Flood Recovery. I have the same staffing budget. It has not changed.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: What is the role of the Deputy Premier in relation to this?

Ms STEPH COOKE: Well, I report to the Deputy Premier.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: So in terms of who is in charge, you have been given this job with a new title—that he did not want—with no extra staff, but you report to him. Is that because he still has some legal responsibility in terms of recovery? Is that why that happens, or is it because he is the leader of the National Party?

Ms STEPH COOKE: The Deputy Premier and the Premier are the two leaders that I report to. They always have been and they will continue to be.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: But again, if we are talking about the architecture of government, my understanding is that in the machinery of government you share Flood Recovery with the Deputy Premier. Is that correct?

Ms STEPH COOKE: There are some elements of the SERM Act for which he and I share responsibility.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Which elements are they?

Ms STEPH COOKE: I will take that on notice and come back to you specifically with the sections.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Do you not know which section of the Act you are sharing with the Deputy Premier?

Ms STEPH COOKE: Again, I will take that on notice. I would not—sorry, that is—

The ACTING CHAIR: That is also time.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: You brought your own bell, Minister, waiting for ours.

The ACTING CHAIR: That is very wise. Our bell is not working, because it is all Opposition time now.

Ms STEPH COOKE: I am terribly sorry.

The ACTING CHAIR: That is the expiry of Opposition questions.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Okay. Well, you will take that on notice and we will pick up some of this this afternoon.

Ms STEPH COOKE: Thank you.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Thank you very much for coming today—a lot of difficult questions and we do really appreciate the work you have all been doing. We know it has been a lot of hours.

The ACTING CHAIR: We will now turn to Government questions, if there are any?

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: I think I am okay, Chair, thank you.

The ACTING CHAIR: Thank you, Minister, for coming this morning. Your questioning session has ended. The Committee will now break for lunch and we will return at 2.00 p.m. with public servants and officers for the afternoon session, which will go until 5:15, I think.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Just to give some people a little hope, we are probably unlikely to go entirely until 5:15 because it will just be Opposition questions. So we have questions, but expect an early mark. We cannot define what that will be, but there will be some—

The ACTING CHAIR: On the other hand, no promises—

MEGAN STIFFLER: Can we hold you to that, Ms Sharpe?

The ACTING CHAIR: No. No promises are being made, it is just a good faith indication.

(The Minister withdrew.)

(Luncheon adjournment)

The ACTING CHAIR: It being 2.00 p.m., this budget estimates committee hearing resumes. We resume with questioning from the Opposition.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: I give you an opportunity to provide any update on questions that you took on notice this morning.

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: I can update a couple of things, Ms Sharpe. Just confirming, with those motorhomes, 124 motorhomes were delivered into communities. There were 40 in Casino, there were the 44 we talked about in Lismore that were relocated temporarily to Alstonville and, yes, there are 40 based at Ballina in the Reflections Holiday Park.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: They are all there and they have people in them?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: Yes.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Great, thank you.

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: The only other thing I would say, which I am just waiting for 100 per cent clarification on, is that energy resources were not the issue with restoration in the north. They have not needed to access additional resources. It was mainly the nature of and the access to the damage that was difficult to work through. So it was not a resourcing challenge; it was the damage and displacement challenges.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: In the pits, yes.

MEGAN STIFFLER: Ms Sharpe, I can update you on the siren in Lismore. The siren was not malfunctioning. I stress that the siren has historically been activated to call firefighters across Lismore to station for response as an old technology. It needs someone to actually activate it physically, as well as power. In the first flood we did not deem it safe to put a firefighter back into the situation. We actually had water to the second level of the fire station. So it could not be physically activated. Then with the second flood that hit the power was still out. Therefore, it was non-operational rather than broken or malfunctioning.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: So the advice given by the SES was incorrect?

MEGAN STIFFLER: I have the correct advice.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: But what I am saying is the advice given to the community—that it was malfunctioning—was incorrect?

MEGAN STIFFLER: By my records, it was incorrect.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Mr Austin, I asked you for some numbers this morning. Have you got any of those for us?

DANIEL AUSTIN: Mr Johnston will provide those.

DAMIEN JOHNSTON: There was an earlier question that the Minister took on notice regarding the budget for NSW SES for 2017. In the financial year 2016-2017, the opex was \$109 million and the capex was \$21 million—so a total of \$130 million for that year. In the 2017-2018 financial year, opex was \$107 million, capex was \$13.6 million, for a total of \$120.6 million.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Did you get me the figures on the number of SES people on the ground? If you have not been able to, that is okay.

DANIEL AUSTIN: I believe—the note that I am looking at—there were 363, but I do need to confirm that.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Could you give us the breakdown of the number of volunteers versus others? Are they all volunteers?

DANIEL AUSTIN: They would be both volunteers and paid staff.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: If you could give us the breakdown when you give us that information, that would be great. I want to talk about the Owens review, which was the review of the NSW State Emergency Service operational response for the March 2017 floods. My understanding is that there were 36 recommendations and that 35 of those were agreed to by the SES. Is that correct?

DANIEL AUSTIN: I believe that to be correct.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: How many of those recommendations have been fully implemented?

DANIEL AUSTIN: The only one outstanding recommendation is actually the replacement of the Murwillumbah SES unit. That has been an ongoing discussion and issue between ourselves and local government in that area. We have, over time, identified a number of sites as potentials. However, all come with their own issues as well. It certainly rates as one of our most high-priority sites to work to replace. However, that is a part of the funding model that we currently have, which is around local government being responsible to provide facilities for SES.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: The premises at Murwillumbah were a problem as far back as 2012. It was a landslip that damaged the building. Is that right?

DANIEL AUSTIN: Correct. There was a landslip, and a number of remediation works have actually occurred on the site to limit any potential. However, that site, as I said, still remains one of highest priority to replace.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: It has been 10 years; it is not a high priority.

DANIEL AUSTIN: I guess I would draw your attention to the funding model that the SES has and the fact that the responsibility for the provision of facilities to the SES—

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: So it is the local government's fault?

DANIEL AUSTIN: —is the local government's responsibility.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Why have you not been able to secure another site? If you have looked at other sites, what is the issue with the sites?

DANIEL AUSTIN: Some of the sites that were identified were just not the right size and layout, so they would not enable the ability to build a standard facility on there. Others potentially got cut off due to flooding or other things, and others were in areas of the locality that perhaps were not suitable.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Have any sites been identified that have not been progressed but meet the criteria?

DANIEL AUSTIN: I am not aware of any sites that have been identified that meet the criteria.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: So it has taken 10 years and we have not got a site. When is there likely to be a site?

DANIEL AUSTIN: As I said to you before, the discussions between us and local government continue on a regular basis. We have identified a number of sites over time but, yes, at this point in time none has been deemed suitable.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: I take you to recommendation 3 of the Owens review, which was for an availability app to streamline out-of-area deployments. Was it used in the recent floods? How many people were deployed via the app?

DANIEL AUSTIN: We continue to work to procure an app. We are currently in the market.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: So there is no app?

DANIEL AUSTIN: There is currently not an app being used. There is a range of local options that are used around the State, but in terms of a statewide service-issue one, not at this point in time.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Recommendation 5 of the Owens review was to develop a "pre-emptive situation and appreciation model". Can you explain to me what that is please?

DANIEL AUSTIN: Absolutely. What we refer to as EMCON—effectively what it does is it takes into—

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Sorry, there are a lot of acronyms. Hansard does not know what it is, and I do not know either.

DANIEL AUSTIN: Effectively, it is "emergency management condition"—EMCON. The concept of EMCON allows us to look at the risk, the readiness and the current conditions oncoming that allow us to assess whether there is a need to move resources, adjust resources, scale up or down along the way. We use that currently. It is quite a detailed set of inputs and quite a detailed set of outputs that we use.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Was it used on 28 February?

DANIEL AUSTIN: Absolutely. It has been used for as long as I have been with the SES.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Given the discussion about resourcing and given that it clearly missed the requirements by a long way, is it going to need a review?

DANIEL AUSTIN: I think what was missed is one of the inputs, being the forecast. I guess I refer back to my comments from this morning that what was forecast and what eventuated were the best part of three metres difference in terms of flood-level heights. What was forecast in terms of rainfall was significantly different. I do concede there is need to look at and invest in alternative and more detailed abilities to forecast and then predict, and technology will be a big part of that into the future.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: I am a layperson in all of this. I do not understand why the SES is making calls—I completely respect the work that you do and the local knowledge that you have—and then the Bureau of Meteorology is making its own predictions. It just seems to be different decision-making happening. This was also raised in the review in 2017 and, particularly, in the community review. I understand there are limits to technology, but I do not understand why there are two different views. You are making one decision when the bureau is saying there is going to be this rain bomb, but somehow it is not picked up in the actioning that takes place. How do you reconcile the difference in what is happening with forecasting and the decision-making?

DANIEL AUSTIN: I disagree with your premise in that one of the primary inputs is actually the bureau's intelligence. So what they tell us is coming is one of the primary pieces of intelligence. The bureau did not forecast a flood height of 14.4 metres.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: I get that but, if we go back to the evacuation issue, the discussion was that the river was not rising anymore—basically it continually rose. It is my understanding that the bureau showed that it did. Am I wrong in that?

DANIEL AUSTIN: The model that I recall seeing actually shows that it had peaked and was coming down. I am assuming you are referring to the secondary modelling?

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Yes, correct.

DANIEL AUSTIN: In the model that I recall seeing, in fact, the river level had peaked and I believe there was a revision downwards of the expected flood height after we had issued the all clear.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: If we can go back to the recommendations of the Owens review, there was a requirement to do handover documents that clearly identify who the incident controller is. Was this document in place on 28 February?

DANIEL AUSTIN: Yes, we document the incident controller and the appointment-maker.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Who was that?

DANIEL AUSTIN: I would have to double-check my records. I will take that on notice.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: But you will take it on notice?

DANIEL AUSTIN: Yes, I will take that on notice.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Take me through that process. When an incident is occurring, there is a document that identifies who is the controller and this goes to the whole point of who is in charge.

DANIEL AUSTIN: Yes.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Who would it have been? Who is it most likely to have been?

DANIEL AUSTIN: It could have been a number of staff, but it would be a level 3 identified incident controller for that particular incident. As I said, I would need to confirm the exact time frame that you are asking about to confirm who it might have been.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: The Incident Management Toolbox, which was recommendation 8 of the review, is that operational?

DANIEL AUSTIN: It is. It has undergone a number of iterations of development over time and it continues to be developed as we move forward.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Is it not finalised?

DANIEL AUSTIN: Like any of those things, they are a work in progress at all times to actually continue to improve the way you do things and to implement learnings out of the next job and so on and so forth. It was used; it was there. It was used by both staff and volunteers. But, as I say, we continue to develop it. We are trying to make it better and better each time.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Obviously massive communications went down because of the severity of the thing. Does that make the management toolbox not really able to be used?

DANIEL AUSTIN: I would have to take on notice whether or not there was any impact on the Incident Management Toolbox, but certainly not from my memory. Yes, I understand multiple telecommunications went down, but we also had a range of systems in place to support that through business continuity plans.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: We will get to the whole telephone issue a bit later. Recommendation 13 states that the Bureau of Meteorology "include notification of faulty gauges on all subsequent flood warnings". What has happened with that system, given that there have clearly been problems? Again, I accept that the SES does not own the gauges, but what is the system once it is identified for them to be fixed, or to be actioned to be fixed?

DANIEL AUSTIN: Ordinarily, if it is picked up that there is a gauge that is not working, then it will be raised with the gauge owner, whether that is the bureau or somebody else.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Who raises it with the gauge owner?

DANIEL AUSTIN: When it is known, the people who have identified it. If we have identified it, then we will raise it. But, as I said to you this morning, at the time I certainly was not aware that the gauge was offline. Some of the ones the bureau, I understand, can pick up themselves from their own data.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: You have people out on boats. As has been discussed a lot this morning, the SES is in control of this terrible incident that is occurring. I assume that there was more than one person who realised that the gauge was out. I find it quite odd that this was not drawn to your attention and formally actioned through the coordination work that you were doing. You are relying on the gauges so much in being able to explain to the community what is going on and to deploy resources and do all of those things. It was a recommendation from the previous reviews. You say that you are talking to the Bureau of Meteorology; how are you talking to them?

DANIEL AUSTIN: Since the Owens report, we actually have an embedded meteorologist who works within our State Command Centre.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: They are there, which is great. The idea being that if their gauge is off they would be told to go and fix it.

DANIEL AUSTIN: There is an embedded meteorologist, and in times of significant incidents we also have an arrangement where the bureau will try to put someone from their hydrology department into the SES as well. Subsequent to the 2017 event, we now have an MOU in place with the bureau for an embedded meteorologist and we have also recently agreed to fund an embedded hydrologist into the SES as well. Recruitment for that position is currently open as we speak.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: There were faulty gauges, though, that the Bureau of Meteorology may or may not have owned, but there does not seem to be any process where that could be addressed. I mean, the gauge is off by 400 millimetres. You said you have an MOU, but this is a recommendation from 2017. I am trying to understand where is the gap. It gets to this point where we have had a second event, possibly a third event, and the gauge is not fixed. This is five years after the review said that you needed to have an official notification system. How is that possible? Are you saying to me that the Bureau of Meteorology was never notified about this faulty gauge?

DANIEL AUSTIN: I need to check the particular gauge that you are talking about because I am not aware as to whether it is an automatic reading gauge or a manual reading gauge. They are still both out there and, as the name suggests, it physically requires someone to go and check that gauge.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: But it seems as though there were others who were able to observe that it was incorrect, and that it was out by 400 millimetres.

DANIEL AUSTIN: I have already given you my answer on that.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Recommendation 20 states:

That the NSW SES formalises the new process for the issuing of Evacuation Orders into Policy.

Given that Ballina and Byron received no evacuation order on 29 and 30 March, what has fallen down here?

DANIEL AUSTIN: There is a difference between riverine flooding and flash flooding. Ultimately, the warnings that we issue, such as the one that was issued for the Wilsons River, are based around riverine flooding. Largely, flash flooding is not something that is forecast and, in fact, by its very nature flash flooding is unpredictable, unforecast and exceptionally difficult to pick up in the radar and the models. The rain event that happened overnight on that Tuesday night was, by and large, a flash flooding event that was not forecast. The bureau, as I said earlier today, had forecast some rainfall during the day. That rainfall had ceased to exist, effectively, and the system was moving away and was expected to track down south, so that was not expected. The rainfall that hit both Ballina and Byron Bay was unforecast and they were flash flood events.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Can we go back to the issue of the Bureau of Meteorology. That was for Ballina and Byron. I have a graph here that looks at the Wilsons River. To go back to your point, there was some sort of forecast that the river was actually receding. This graph basically shows that from 12 o'clock it was going up the whole way.

DANIEL AUSTIN: I cannot see that. I do not know what time frame. I am happy to have a discussion with the bureau and see if they are able to provide those hydrographs.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: It perplexes me that you do not have them. To just go back to Ballina and Byron and the no evacuation orders, you are basically saying there are two different processes. The Bureau of Meteorology did not have it. Referring to the recommendations from 2017, does that mean that there needs to be further consideration of the different types of flooding? I accept that we are seeing an unprecedented event.

I accept that you cannot look at 2017 and go, "Everything that you put in place would fix what has happened over the last month." It is unprecedented. Unfortunately, it is going to be more frequent, which is why I am interested. What needs to happen to pick up the problems that happened in Ballina and Byron, in your view, that failed in late March?

DANIEL AUSTIN: I think I made reference earlier. There is certainly an opportunity, I believe, around forecasting in some of these, I guess, more challenging, more high-risk areas. By and large, the accuracy of the bureau is actually quite good. However, there do appear clearly to be some areas that are more challenging to forecast. Whether that is because of topography, whether that is because of the interaction of the weather systems, whether that is for other reasons—I guess I will leave that to a meteorologist and hydrologist to explain the in-depth piece.

But to me there is certainly an opportunity to invest in that, as there is an opportunity to invest in the prediction around flash flooding and, particularly, thunderstorms. The bureau has said for a long time that rainfall events associated with thunderstorms are exceptionally hard to predict. You do not have to look too far to see the significant differences in totals that occurred across that landscape on that night. Totals of 140 millimetres in one location, yet only a handful of kilometres down the road, it was 160 or thereabouts. It is that interaction and that ability to accurately forecast. Whilst we already use local knowledge and we work with people on the ground and we talk to people that are looking at a whole range of different things, in my mind, there is a real opportunity to invest further in the way we model and the way that we predict in the future, which would then lead the whole rest of the conversation around how the response plays out and other such things.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Since 2017 how much more money has been invested in modelling?

DANIEL AUSTIN: That is a question I would have to take on notice. I do not know. That would be either the research agencies or the bureau that would need to provide those answers.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Thanks. Event 144, which was the response to flooding in Port Macquarie last year, are you aware of the Fire and Emergency Services Authorities Council report into that? Has that been completed?

DANIEL AUSTIN: Yes. The peer review that was undertaken by AFAC was commissioned by us. It was part of our—

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Sorry, AFAC is the Australasian Fire and Emergency Services Authorities Council?

DANIEL AUSTIN: Yes, sorry. They just roll off the tongue some days. As a part of the after-action review that we undertook into that particular event, we also commissioned that particular peer review by others to help us look at some recommendations, some options moving forward. We received that late last year. I forget the date off the top of my head. We have subsequently been working through that. I am sure, as you can appreciate, with the consistent ongoing operational activity, we still are looking at some of those. However, there is a recommendation in there about the embedded hydrologist that I mentioned before. That is one that we have very quickly and very easily been able to move on to work down that line.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: How many recommendations are there in that report?

DANIEL AUSTIN: Off the top of my head I think it is 28.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Will that report be made public?

DANIEL AUSTIN: It is certainly our intent. Once we have had time to properly analyse it in line with everything else, and accept all the recommendations in it, if that is the way we go, yes, down the track that will be available.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: I assume you cannot give us a time frame on that.

DANIEL AUSTIN: No. A couple of other things are in front of it.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: This is my final question for now. What other data do you use, other than the Bureau of Meteorology?

DANIEL AUSTIN: There are a range of data inputs. The Bureau of Meteorology is certainly one of the biggest. However, we also use the floodplain management studies that are there. They guide the flood-warning consultative committee around the levels. We also use quite a significant amount of local input. Ultimately, we capture a lot of that in our flood intelligence databases that come together to provide, I guess, a single source of truth. But we also validate that with other partners on the ground as well. There are a number of pieces of intelligence that go into it.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: Mr Austin, can you tell me who is responsible for flood emergency sub-plans? Is that the SES?

DANIEL AUSTIN: Yes, it is.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: They are generated by the SES. I understand local councils do the flood management plans and then the SES does the sub-plans. What occurs at the SES level and what do you do with those?

DANIEL AUSTIN: There is a variety of consultation that goes into the development of those, through the local emergency management committees and the like, that brings all the different stakeholders together to work through those. That puts in a range of plans in terms of actions ultimately down the track for when something occurs.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: Are they reviewed on a regular basis?

DANIEL AUSTIN: Yes. I will confirm, but I believe every five years is the aim of what we go for. However, we are currently reviewing that because there are some that, because of lack of development or other things, really do not change so probably do not warrant being done every five years. There might be others that actually need to be reviewed more often.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: What would be the status of the Lismore flood emergency sub-plan?

DANIEL AUSTIN: I would have to take that particular one and check that.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: Can you tell me the last time it was reviewed?

DANIEL AUSTIN: I would have to check that for you.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: Do you think that, in fact, the one that was currently in place was within its five-year life span?

DANIEL AUSTIN: I need to confirm. But I do believe so because I believe it may have been reviewed in only the last few years.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: What occurs in a review? What do you do?

DANIEL AUSTIN: It is, I guess, a mini version of developing the new one from scratch. Again there is the consultation through the LEMCs. There is a range of exercising activities that go on at that LEMC level. Again it is distributed and worked through with people. Triggers, et cetera, are looked at. In the case of, say, the Tuggerah Lakes one that was referenced this morning, there were changes made to the actual warning levels because of what was observed on the ground previously.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: I assume that you will take this on notice. Could you provide the flood emergency sub-plans across the North Coast, when were they last reviewed and when were they due to be reviewed. Mr Fitzsimmons, can I take you to an answer you gave this morning. You were asked about how many people are working at Resilience NSW. I just want to make sure that we are all operating with the same figures here. Two hundred and forty-five people, and 26 of them were at the SES level.

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: That is correct.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: When is that as of?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: This week.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: As of this week?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: Yes.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: The data in *The Daily Telegraph* this morning is as of 30 June 2021.

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: I am not quite sure what the datasets are in the story, but what I can say is at the close-out of 2020 our annual report identified a total number of employees of 103. Then at the close-out of 2021, the total number of employees was 105.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: We have the same data.

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: It was in this period throughout last year that we undertook the transition from the old OEM structures into the new structure and we advertised, recruited and placed people in the organisation.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: So you doubled in size in a year?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: Well, that is actually—it is misleading, unfortunately, the figures.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: I am sorry, more than doubled.

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: No, sorry. When we took on the agency from OEM we had something like more than 300 personnel that came across with us. There were a number that were employees but the vast majority were some other form of employment or engagement to make—

The Hon. WALT SECORD: What, contractors, temps?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: Contractors, temporaries, secondments. If you can name the potential engagement, we inherited it.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: Consultants?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: So what we then did was undertake an independent review to look at the direction—

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Is that PwC?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: The PwC review. We undertook the independent review, which was early on in 2020—mid-2020, from memory. We worked through that with internal and external stakeholder engagement, benchmarked against other jurisdictions around Australia and then New Zealand. We identified a need to reduce the ad hocery that was there in terms of the former arrangements and we progressed an ERC minute to confirm the establishment and the quantum of people in an ongoing capacity across the different roles and functions, taking on board a number of learnings and lessons out of the recent fires and other events, particularly around a lack of regional presence and connection with local governments and the need to lift local government capability and capacity.

We ended up settling on an establishment of around 230 that were approved by the Cabinet. Then we effectively transitioned across to that, moved people on and employed people. We advertised about 150 jobs last year and we processed about 10,500 applications to secure those roles. The vast majority of that was done remotely during COVID and other challenges. That is why you will see the numbers are different at the close-out report periods because a lot of the activity was occurring in the intervening period.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: My understanding is that the PwC report recommended the 300 staff establishment. Is that right?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: No. It was a real challenge to get a clear figure of the OEM composition out of the big DCJ cluster arrangement when we got there. I do not have the PwC report with me but I think you will find that the PwC report, Ms Sharpe, identified that the composition at the time was over 300 of that varied arrangement and they recommended a consolidation down to the 230 with a peer-reviewed structure and a focus on leveraging surge capability from across government and partner organisations and internal to the agency, rather than the approach of hiring lots of external resource to bolster numbers. I must admit some of the people we had there that were not ongoing had been there for many years under a variety of different funding programs.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: You have already said this morning that there are now 245, so you are already 15 above. Is that because you are now having to fill it in with contractors and temps again?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: Well, there is a combination. There are particular projects that we are leading for the sector so we have engaged people to lead project management; and, yes, there have been some contractors engaged to support areas where there might be challenges in filling roles, or indeed some of the notional services required.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: But you are above the 230?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: Correct.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Do you anticipate that to continue?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: Just where we are at the moment, yes, for the foreseeable future, but it is not foreseen to be going up to the more than 300-odd mark likely inherited at all.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: But there has been a big change in your wage profile, given that you have so many SES staff.

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: Well, I think what we have been able to do, by lifting out of the big bureaucracy of DCJ, we have actually put front and centre what our labour expense cap is, what our operating

budgets are, and our total salaries labour expense cap with operating expenses is about \$69 million. As I mentioned this morning, \$38 million would be all-encompassing of the labour expense cap.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: When the people came over, how many people were made redundant from OEM and how much did that cost?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: I will take that on notice. It was only a couple that were made redundant. We were able to—

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: You had 300 come over and then you were down. I do not understand how that works.

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: Sorry. When I said the 300, there were only 20 per cent that were ongoing employees. The rest were temporaries, contractors, secondments—whatever you can contemplate. We were able to, with the PSA and others, secure and transition a number of long-term temporary employees to ongoing roles. We transitioned ongoing employees into the new profile and structure. The redundancies in the main—there were no redundancies of staff, but we may have wound up a couple of the executive people at the time. But there were no redundancies, as such, that were processed of staff, ongoing employees.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: I want to take you back to the 245 staff and the 26 that are SES people. Those 26 SES people, where are they based?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: Seven of them are focused around New South Wales at regional profiles and locations and others would be based across—so even some of my head office based employees live in regional New South Wales in the executive, but they are across the different portfolios of the organisation with a focus on six dedicated personnel leading regional coordination and support to local governments and other partner agencies.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: How many Resilience NSW staff are currently based on the North Coast?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: In terms of operations?

The Hon. WALT SECORD: I just want to know the figure and then I will ask follow-up questions.

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: I will take that on notice. I have got a rotating cycle of people being deployed in supporting operations up north. Like, I have got people in the Hawkesbury-Nepean and of course up through parts of the Hunter.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: But you must know: Dozen, two dozen?

MEGAN STIFFLER: No. There would be dozens up there.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: Dozens?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: Yes.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: Can you quantify it a bit more than "dozens"?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: I will. I will take that on notice.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: Of the 245 staff, how many would be on the North Coast at this moment? I would like an exact figure. Maybe your staff behind you could get it to me.

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: I am happy to get a figure, but I would qualify that figure by saying there are people going up there and coming back, so there are actually personal rotations that are occurring on deployments.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: You must know what is in a deployment.

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: Yes, but it varies, Mr Secord.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: You do not know?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: There are a number of recovery centres. There is the regional coordination centre. I will be able to get you a number indicatively of what is up there. As I say, the number varies depending on the roles and functions that are being filled.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: Of the 26 SES people, how many SES people are on the North Coast? Are there two, three, four, five, 26?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: Again, I will take that on notice, but as we speak I would expect there would be about—at any given time there is probably more than half a dozen up there.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: Half a dozen? That is six. When it comes to determining what the 26 SES people do, what are those 26 SES people doing at the moment? Are they all working on the North Coast or are they working on other issues?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: No. Our role in support of operational activity like we are seeing now is many and varied. We have got people helping out with recovery coordination and leadership. We have people helping out with significant recovery centres, and we have got a significant amount of work, as we signalled earlier this morning—so far about \$2.5 billion worth of programs across four streams and more than 20 different programs, which are actually being coordinated through Resilience NSW on behalf of government and in partnership with the Commonwealth, so there are people working on all those different aspects.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: Can you provide some tangible, practical examples?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: Across four streams, there are \$2.5 billion worth of programs and 20 discrete programs that include everything from relief and clean-up, through to housing, through to all manner of activities.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: Can you give us some tangible examples?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: I do not know what you mean by that.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: For example, "We have a Resilience person picking up rubbish on the street. We have got a Resilience person finding someone accommodation. We have a Resilience person estimating the cost to fix that road." I am just trying to get an indication, sir, of what your body does. That is not really clear in the community.

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: We lead and coordinate recovery efforts, so it is a multi-agency—

The Hon. WALT SECORD: Okay, so provide some tangible examples.

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: It is about recovery centres. It is about grants and programs. It is about formulating and compiling the assistance measures and packages. It is about negotiating and working with the Commonwealth to enable the announcements and the delivery of those programs to occur across the State.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: Does it do things face to face with human beings?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: Absolutely. We have got people, as I said, in recovery centres. We have got numbers of recovery centres, along with our partner agencies, right across the North Coast and down through the Hunter. We have also got them in the Hawkesbury-Nepean recovery centres and recovery access points. We have lots of interaction with people, lots of coordination and leadership with people. I do not know what else you want me to describe. There are lots of different things.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: I am trying to get an indication of what your body actually does. The 26 SES people are given KPIs. For example, you would say you have received 4,000 applications for grants, you have processed them and you have rejected this many. I am trying to get tangible examples of what your body does.

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: I would not have a KPI around processing grants as such, because it varies for any given season and for any given disaster. But all the executive have got performance agreements and contracts in place. Depending on the role that the person has, the division or the function that they look after, those responsibilities will vary. Just getting back to your earlier comment, I have got 11 people normally based in the North Coast team branch, and then on the ground today in northern New South Wales I have got 49 people.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: Mr Austin, earlier I asked you about the flood emergency sub-plans. I have just checked the website, and it says the Ballina one was drafted in 2013 and should be reviewed no later than July 2018—not reviewed. The Byron one was drafted in 2013 and should be reviewed by 2018—not reviewed. The Kyogle plan was set up in July 2013 and should be reviewed no later than July 2018. Richmond Valley—one after another. Why have none of the sub-management plans across the North Coast been reviewed or updated?

DANIEL AUSTIN: The information that I have just got in response to your earlier question is that the Lismore city one was actually 2018.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Yes, you would expect so after 2017.

DANIEL AUSTIN: Correct. I would need to have a look at all of those and take them on notice. If you can provide the specific examples, I am happy to follow through on them.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: All of the flood sub-plans in all of the council areas across the North Coast. The Lismore one was reviewed in 2018, so that is four years ago.

DANIEL AUSTIN: And it is due again in 2023.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: You do not do it on the last day; there is a bit of lead-up. You said you consult and things like that, so was there work underway involving the Lismore plan?

DANIEL AUSTIN: I would have to find out where the progress was, but you are right that they do not wait until the day they are due to expire. They are normally worked through and we normally do work through, once we see major flooding in locations, to progress them.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: Mr Fitzsimmons, you have 26 people at the SES level working within your organisation. Do you have deputies answering to you?

DAMIEN JOHNSTON: Sorry, could I also just clarify for Hansard that SES is not State Emergency Service. I think a lot of people might think that SES is referring—

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Yes, that is right—Senior Executive Service.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: I understand why you would want to make that distinction. Sorry, the State Executive Service.

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: Or they call them PSSE now—there is an acronym for everything.

The CHAIR: Just to confuse everybody!

The Hon. WALT SECORD: Yes, I still call them SES.

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: Sorry, what was your question?

The Hon. WALT SECORD: I want to know the structure that sits beneath you. How many deputies do you have?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: I have got five executive directors that report to me across a range of different functions.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: Where are those five positions based? Where are you based?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: We are based at Homebush; we have relocated to Homebush as part of the establishment of the agency. We evaluated the suitability of the premises, both financially and operationally, and we relocated to the Homebush precinct. We are in the same building as the Rural Fire Service, and in agreement with the Rural Fire Service, we have designated the facility at the SEOC level there as the State's crisis centre—as opposed to where it was previously, in the facility we had at Haymarket. It was also economically viable, with close to a 50 per cent reduction in rental arrangements, which allowed us to better spend that on having regional locations across New South Wales.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: So your five deputies are based with you out there.

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: They are based out of the head office, yes.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: When you established the head office at Homebush, did you have to undertake renovations, repairs and alterations?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: Very minor, because what we were able to do was secure the lease of a building that was largely fitted out for a previous tenant that never occupied it. There are minor works that were undertaken, like some blinds on windows and things like that, but most of the furniture and everything was there. Yes, there were some minor refurbishments.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: You have five deputies based out there. Can you give me the details of those five deputies and their areas of jurisdiction?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: We have matters around people and culture; strategy, policy and programs; operational coordination; local coordination and service delivery; and financial services.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: Are any of those people processing business grants and assistance to the North Coast?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: We have got the team processing a range of grants, programs and supports for people in all flood-affected areas and disaster-affected areas, including the North Coast.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: As of today, can you give me a breakdown of people applying for business grants—the number of applications and the number that have been successful?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: I can get you that on notice. It is a living arrangement that is administered through—

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Sorry, I thought Service—

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: Correct.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: It is Service NSW that does it, so you do not have people doing that.

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: No, he asked me separately about business grants. Service NSW—

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: What other grants are you doing, then?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: We look after things like the DRG, the disaster relief grants, specifically. But again, we are working in partnership with Service NSW to better align that through the one-stop government system. But my question more broadly is whether they are small business grants. We coordinate the whole \$2.5 billion worth of programs that have been developed and announced through Resilience NSW, through the Minister, on behalf of Government. We then negotiate those packages with the Commonwealth, through the NRRA, to secure the co-contributions as appropriate. Then they are assigned and delivered through a range of different partner organisations, both government and not.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: Mr Fitzsimmons, how do you fit in relation to Deputy Police Commissioner Mal Lanyon up there?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: As I said this morning, Mr Secord, Mal Lanyon has been appointed as my regional recovery coordinator for northern New South Wales. Mal Lanyon reports to me, and I have got another officer appointed to look after the Hawkesbury-Nepean as well.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: Right, so they both report to you.

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: Correct.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: How many people from the ADF, the Australian Defence Force, are still on the North Coast?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: I will take that on notice specifically, but the numbers would be in the thousands still.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: Who do they report to?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: If they are up north, they are working under the stewardship of our regional coordinator, Mr Lanyon, and the team.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: So they answer to Mr Lanyon.

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: As the State recovery controller, I have a regional coordinator for the north and a regional coordinator for the Hawkesbury-Nepean, and the resources and efforts that are being affected there are reporting to those local regional coordinators and then up to me and the State recovery committee.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: How long will the ADF be on the North Coast?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: That is subject to tasking and requirements, and it is reviewed periodically.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: When is it reviewed? When you say periodically—

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: It can be reviewed on a daily basis. The last extension we did was for a period of up to another six weeks, with a review as we go along depending on what eventuates and what happens. As you would appreciate, the events of only a week ago shifted some of the focus in terms of what the tasking and priorities actually were.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: How long is Mal Lanyon's term of duty?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: At this stage he there is for several months and we are going to review that as we go along. If I can add a clarification, my team has just sent me a note and on the report today we have got 3,200 ADF personnel still in the field.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: I just want to come back to this flood management plan issue. Of the six LGAs across the Northern Rivers, we accept that the Lismore one was updated in 2018 and it is due for review. Clearly the circumstances will mean that it will definitely be reviewed next year. But the other five were done in

2013 and they were due to be reviewed in 2018. It is nine years on and they have not been reviewed. I just want to be clear that that is our advice. Is that correct?

DANIEL AUSTIN: Yes. I guess the only piece of clarifying advice I would say to that is just because it has a past due date does not necessarily mean it is invalid. The data may well still be accurate.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: That is what I was going to get to. Aside from the fact that every five years they are supposed to be done and they have not been done, there are a number of things that trigger a review. There is obviously the five-year period, which has not been done, but there is also when new flood data becomes available. Obviously the Lismore floods in 2017 triggered Lismore's review. Was there an active decision not to take into account the other surrounding LGAs as a result of that flood?

DANIEL AUSTIN: Not that I am aware of, but that predates my position. I cannot give you an honest answer.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: No, but can you take it on notice and let me know?

DANIEL AUSTIN: Sure.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Presumably there was other flood data as a result of that event that was not just in Lismore.

DANIEL AUSTIN: Yes. It depends whether, I guess, the data actually did change for that area or whether or not the data remained current and the catchment reacted as it was meant to. But we will take that on notice.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: That is what I was going to ask you. For other changes of local flood risk, who would decide that to trigger a review? Through what has been stated before and in information that we have, my understanding is that what triggers a review is obviously the five-year period, which has not happened, and new flood data becoming available. We are not sure after the 2017 flood or for those other five local government areas whether there was new flood data. You tell us you are going to take that on notice, and I accept that. There are also changes in local flood risk, including things like increased land development on flood-prone land, infrastructure upgrades, evacuation routes and those kinds of things. I just cannot believe that in that area of the world in New South Wales there have been no changes in nine years that would trigger a review. What you seem to be saying to me is that if nothing has changed then it is not unacceptable for there not to have been a review of these plans since 2013.

DANIEL AUSTIN: As I said to you, I will take that on notice to look into the circumstances behind that time.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: When developing the plans, the SES do the main ones but you do it with the local management groups. Is that how they are done?

DANIEL AUSTIN: Correct. The local council develops and pays for the flood management plan and then our work flows—excuse the pun—from that.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: Mr Fitzsimmons, I want to take you back to the use of consultants in Resilience NSW. What was the expenditure on consultants in the last financial year? That would be 2021.

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: Bear with me for one second. I have got that figure. For the 2021 financial year?

The Hon. WALT SECORD: Yes.

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: There were 11 consultants for 2021 at a total of \$1,881,599.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: So almost \$2 million.

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: Yes, \$1.9 million.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: What were those 11 consultants working on? Are there 11 separate projects?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: Yes. For the 2021 consultancies, we had work associated with the establishment and transition of employment for the agency; we had some work around a call-and-dispatch business case; we had lessons learnt programs from bushfire recovery efforts; we had the mental health review project for the board of commissioners; we had some work value assessments; and we also had community, recovery and resilience fund the probity advice, which is a program that we were administering. We had enterprise risk assessment, including risk workshop across the agency; the engagement of external specialists to assist with

health and safety matters; a governance administration audit and health check; and a contribution towards the national consultant in disaster recovery with the Department of Human Services at the Commonwealth level.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: I want to take you back to one of the consultants. You had a lessons learnt consultant. What was that in relation to? Was that the bushfires?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: Yes, that was concerning bushfire recovery efforts in June to September of 2020.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: Have you put on any consultants for the current floods in response to the north and north-west Sydney floods?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: Not that I am aware of in relation to the floods. Let me take that on notice and I will just double-check that I have not—as I have said openly before, we have hired a couple of additional contractors to help close some gaps. But I will just double-check on consultants.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: I would like to go back to the lessons learnt project from the bushfires. What was the result of that review?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: I do not know that I have got that with me today. I am happy to take that on notice. I will get that back to you.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: Do you know generally what it was about? Did it relate to your activity?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: It is like everything, yes. It is concerning things like recovery efforts and coordination across the sector. I just did not bring that note with me. I will take that on notice and I will get a response back to you.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: When Resilience NSW is not working on the North Coast in the middle of a natural disaster, what is the day-to-day activity of your body?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: As I indicated earlier, our role is to lead and coordinate recovery. What we need to understand is that we have never before seen a recovery environment like the last two years in New South Wales following the fires, COVID, the storm and flood events 12 months ago in the Hawkesbury-Nepean and mid North Coast and of course this time around. Whilst disasters can take days and weeks to deliver effect, recovery takes weeks, months and many years. But our focus also under the State Emergency and Rescue Management Act, as I said earlier, is to lead that recovery effort. We do not duplicate the roles and functions of the emergency service agencies, such as the RFS, SES and combat agencies.

We also have responsibility for leading and coordinating the Welfare Services Functional Area. That is a broad spectrum of different things, which can include the coordination and work with evacuation centres and immediate support for things like food, clothing and shelter. That was particularly pertinent through the disaster events that I mentioned but also through COVID, which saw a very drawn-out and protracted displacement of people and disruption to people across New South Wales. I think, alone, off the top of my head, it was something like 70,000-odd support hampers of food, sanitary products and other essentials, safety apparel, gloves, masks and other things that were distributed across the State, not just in the Greater Sydney region but right across New South Wales. We manage ongoing, outside of disasters disruption to people and Disaster Relief Grants for the most needy low-income families across New South Wales, coordinate support for councils in that regard and connect people with services and support such as wellbeing and mental health.

We also lead the negotiation with the Commonwealth through the National Recovery and Resilience Agency, the NRRRA, in terms of planning and preparation but also the development and delivery of programs in times of disasters, and that is helping councils and communities. As commissioner, myself, I chair the State Emergency Management Committee, the lead committee for the disaster and emergency management arrangements for the State of New South Wales. We provide advice to the Minister on everything from prevention, preparation, response through to recovery, including the preparation of the New South Wales EMPLAN and the associated sub and supporting plans of the EMPLAN. We work very closely with, and again in my capacity I chair, the board of commissioners, which is particularly in relation to the Rural Fire Service, the SES and Fire and Rescue, but also in invitation with the police and ambulance to ensure that we are optimising policy coordination and collaboration across the emergency services sector.

We are also looking at, as I mentioned earlier, in our first 18 months or so of establishment, a focus on building resilience across the State and the development of the State resilience strategy to look at disaster resilience across the State and target investment going forward, particularly into better risk mitigation and capability development. We have got the implementation of the five-year New South Wales Critical Infrastructure Resilience Strategy working with government, infrastructure owners and operators, and the community to identify and

improve critical infrastructure. That is a program that also ties in with our Commonwealth partners. We have also got the State Recovery Plan that provides a framework and architecture for recovery that can be tailored to meet the needs of different communities. The other one is the management of the New South Wales Lessons Management Framework and the delivery of annual State lessons to ensure that agencies and our EM sector, particularly through the SEMC, take those lessons.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: Mr Fitzsimmons, now taking us to the North Coast floods, you were talking of the reports and reviews into lessons learnt and things like that. What changes have been made in response to responsibilities and demarcations? In fact, have changes been made as a result of the North Coast floods into your structure and how you engage or interact with other wings of government?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: Sorry, can you just ask that question again? I am not quite understanding it.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: What I want to know is that after the North Coast floods, as a result—

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: I think the North Coast floods are still going actually.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: Have there been any learnings or changes involving your structure and your interaction with the SES or RFS? Have there been any structural changes that have resulted from recent events?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: No, we have not changed our structure in relation to these recent events. But what I would say by way of example of lessons, initiatives and dedicated resources is that, as we saw following the fires and the lessons learnt out of the fires, in relation to recovery and particularly the extraordinary events of 12 months ago with the storms and floods in the Hawkesbury-Nepean and on the mid North Coast we initiated, in partnership with the fire services, the ADF and the SES, we intervened very early in standing up in anticipation our recovery structures and arrangements. We initiated significant relief effort to impacted and displaced communities with the introduction of the washout and the clean-up to help people remove soiled product, materials and linings of homes. As we spoke with community members and councils who have been through floods frequently over the years, for many of them, those sorts of joined up initiatives, for a lot of those areas, put them ahead physically and psychologically with the recovery anywhere from four to eight weeks.

We have seen that further streamlined in relation to its expeditious deployment during the recent floods of the February and March period of this year, up the North Coast obviously but also again through the Hawkesbury-Nepean. Even with the lessons learnt out of only 12 months ago, particularly those transition arrangements about making sure these crews were being organised, we were working with defence, framing up the personnel and identifying the strike teams and the locations to house them before the waters were even receding out of a lot of these inundated areas, so that as the waters receded we could join with SES as the lead agency and provide that clean-up and washout service. We were also then partnering in the Rapid Damage Assessment Teams, the RDAs, and then—

The Hon. WALT SECORD: Okay, I have a taste of it.

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: Another really important aspect is—

The ACTING CHAIR: Commissioner—

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: —the extraordinary event of clean-up public works and environment.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: Come on, Commissioner, you are having a lend of us now.

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: I am not actually. It is critically important, with respect.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: No, you are having a lend of us.

The ACTING CHAIR: As I was going to say, witnesses can answer as they see fit.

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: He did ask me for examples of lessons learnt.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: Yes, but you were having a lend of the Committee.

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: No, I am not actually, with respect.

The ACTING CHAIR: Perhaps just try to answer more briefly, and then if Mr Secord wants more elaboration he will seek it. We have a bit of time but we have a lot of distance to cover. So if you could try to keep your answers, with respect, more focused and briefer, we can seek elaboration if need be.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: Thank you, Mr Chair. I want to take you to who has responsibility for assisting the New South Wales flood inquiry being carried out by former Commissioner Fuller and Mary O'Kane?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: The Premier has appointed the inquiry.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: Are you providing any support to that inquiry?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: We will be a contributor to the inquiry. I understood DPC were providing support and coordinating with the agencies to the inquiry.

The Hon. WALT SECORD: So you are not providing any support to the inquiry?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: We will be providing lots of support to the inquiry, I suspect.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Acting Commissioner Stiffler, I might go to you with this. Back in terms of Fire and Rescue NSW, there is a design standards policy document which articulates the standards for modern fire stations. Are you familiar with that?

MEGAN STIFFLER: I know of the document. It is a very technical document, so I am not across every technical aspect of building codes et cetera, but I am aware of the document.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Have you been briefed on whether or not Fire and Rescue NSW is meeting that standard specified in that document?

MEGAN STIFFLER: We have the document as a guide for us and for all of our fire stations—all 334. We go through an assessment of those buildings and rate their current facilities against standards.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Is that done as a matter of course annually or something, as part of WHS inspections?

MEGAN STIFFLER: WHS inspections have their own routine, but what we do is every year we look at our stations for their currency of facilities and also put another layer on top of it to understand building growth and population growth or decline. We look at industry and if it has changed, and we look at development that is coming towards that station patch.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: If I could just zero in on the amenities for females specifically, or lack thereof, have you got any data on whether or not those stations come up to those requirements to provide those facilities?

MEGAN STIFFLER: Certainly. As a female career firefighter, it is very dear to my heart, such a subject, so thank you for raising it. Of the 334 fire stations, we have assessed that 128 of those facilities currently would not provide appropriate privacy for females.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: So 128 out of the 334?

MEGAN STIFFLER: Correct. Of those, 26 currently do not have females rostered to those facilities. We are looking at 102 stations, which are a priority.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: But, of course, those 26 that do not have any female staff allocated, it is quite feasible that at any point in time they could?

MEGAN STIFFLER: Correct, but we have put a priority on—

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: In regard to prioritising. I understand, yes. Do you have any plans to address that? There is a fairly significant gap. We are talking about just over a third, I think.

MEGAN STIFFLER: Certainly. When I started with Fire and Rescue NSW six months ago, one of the things that attracted me was the focus that the commissioner has been placing on not only the attraction but the retention of female firefighters. Part of my substantive portfolio is the building and facilities portfolio, and one of my first taskings was to understand my portfolio in full as an asset base. I have inherited facilities that I have been empowered to prioritise. I am currently working with Treasury and the Minister on what those priorities look like and the body of work before us to bring us to what I would say is a modern standard—not only for females but I think privacy is a right of every person in the workplace. It is a priority for me for all of our firefighters to have that privacy in either the turnout room or in shower/ablution facilities, et cetera.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Sure. But we have 128 out of the 334 facilities not catering for females and only 26 have not got rostered. Again, that is a fairly high proportion. Is there a time line on bringing them up to speed to cater for that?

MEGAN STIFFLER: Certainly. There is a layer of needs that privacy is only one aspect. We have a very strong focus on what we call clean and work areas in a station. Over 50 of our fire stations are heritage-listed. Another complexity to prioritisation includes whether the modern fire appliance fits within some of these facilities. We also take into consideration the facilities available for breathing apparatus cleansing, and we also look at

workplace health and safety issues. All of those things help us with the prioritisation of which fire stations should be focused on first.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: But I am specifically asking about—let us zero in on the specific question, if I could be quite pointed. A lack of amenities for females in 128 stations. What are you doing to address that high proportion that does not cater for our female firefighters?

MEGAN STIFFLER: Certainly. Not only are they being prioritised in that overall work, as I have just explained; we are also allocating specific funds to do interim measures to provide privacy whilst those minor and major capital works are being prioritised. For a station, perhaps that is further down the priority list. We can do interim measures with that focused budget. That was \$1.8 million this financial year that we can do interim measures to provide some level of privacy as an interim measure while capital works are being prioritised.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: You have this situation, for example, where there is no female shower facilities or bathrooms, presumably. Then you have a capital works program spread over how many financial years?

MEGAN STIFFLER: We currently have a focus on—it takes around five years to realise any particular station's body of work, taking into account we might have to procure land. We look at design specific to the land that has either been refurbished or purchased, so it is staggered over five years. It would be prudent to look at five- or 10-year periods.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Commissioner, if I do a quick calculation, if you have \$1.8 million for interim privacy remediation spread over 128 stations, that gives you \$14,000 per station to bring it up to speed over what could be a five-year period before you get facilities in there.

MEGAN STIFFLER: Some of those stations are already in a capital works program where they will be getting a full refurb or a rebuild. Not all of those stations need an interim solution. If they are already programmed for capital works of some sort, we will use that \$1.8 million for those that are not currently programmed or have funding.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: But a lot of those 128 might not be finished for five years to cater for our female firefighters. That is the essence of the problem, is it?

MEGAN STIFFLER: Correct.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: That would imply a shortfall in funding. In a workplace—particularly in a job like this but in all occupations—an employee, whether they are male or female, should have access to basic shower and toilet. Would you accept that there is a funding shortfall that needs to be fixed?

MEGAN STIFFLER: There is funding that needs to be prioritised. We estimate over a 10-year period about a \$399 million focus that we need to invest in over those facilities. I would also like to point out—

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Sorry. Is that currently not allocated in the budget?

MEGAN STIFFLER: Not allocated. That is an estimate of what it would take.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Could you quote that figure again?

MEGAN STIFFLER: Three hundred and ninety-nine million over a 10-year period. I also point out that whilst we are doing interim measures, some of those 108 stations we spoke of, there is privacy that can be obtained by females utilising the ablutions area rather than their turnout room. So we can separate—

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Sorry, what is an ablution area?

MEGAN STIFFLER: Toilets and showers. It was just a nice way of not saying "toilets", Mr Buttigieg.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Yes, you can say "dunnies", if you want.

MEGAN STIFFLER: Yes. But what we can do is—it is not an ideal option—separate and give people privacy simply by moving them into another room. To me, in a modern fire service, we would be able to cater to that in the one turnout room. Currently no-one has to be dressed outside of privacy. There are options. I think we can do it better.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: In the broader suite of appropriateness you identified beyond just simple amenities for females, is there a list of stations with urgent upgrade needs, like a precised-down priority list?

MEGAN STIFFLER: What we have done in the past is we have prioritised a list based on the funding that has been given. Since I have come into the organisation and worked with the commissioner, what we are

currently doing is looking at all of our 334 and putting them in order of priority from one right through to 334. We have had over 67 capital works investments over the past 10 years. They will be at the bottom of the 334. We have currently employed KPMG to look at how we prioritise our fire station priority list to make sure it is robust and transparent, and that is due to be completed over the next four weeks. Once that robust system has been checked and given us assurance that it is correct, we will be publishing the list in order of priority.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: So that list does exist but it has not gone through the lens of who is doing it—KPMG—yet?

MEGAN STIFFLER: Yes.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: But the list exists? Are you able to provide that list of urgent upgrades?

MEGAN STIFFLER: We have a current lens that looks over the list of the 334.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: So there is no priority list at the moment and KPMG is sorting that out. Is that right?

MEGAN STIFFLER: No, I will just re-clarify.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Sorry.

MEGAN STIFFLER: We currently have 334 stations. Once we analyse what their current facilities are, that will be calculated. Then we have another lens, which takes into account traffic build-up, population growth, recent rezonings, industry changes, et cetera. Then that is another lens. When you put those together, it gives us the order that we should be addressing in our capital works.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: So there is no list where currently these stations are in a terrible state, they need an urgent upgrade, let us get to these, whether it is 20, 30, 50 or 60. There is no such list at the moment. Is that right?

MEGAN STIFFLER: I think with those two lenses that I have just spoken about we could put our stations in order based on their current facilities and the dynamics I spoke about as our second lens and that will put them in order one through 334.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Sure, but these are lenses that you are yet to apply—

MEGAN STIFFLER: We currently apply them. KPMG are giving us assurance that they are robust and transparent.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: But it is one to 334 at the moment. It is not one to 60, these must be done within the next six months, or anything like that. There is nothing like that that exists?

MEGAN STIFFLER: I currently know that in order from one to 334 is what we should be focusing on. I have been in the organisation for six months and believe in order for me, hand on heart, to say this priority list is 100 per cent correct—

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Are you able to provide that priority list?

MEGAN STIFFLER: I will take that on notice and make sure that there is no reason why I cannot provide that. I will get some advice on that for you.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Okay, thank you. I just want to move on to—I was going to say the old chestnut—the saga of Oran Park. We had a promise made back in 2015. Can you tell us where that is up to in construction?

MEGAN STIFFLER: Certainly. One moment, please. The current situation with Oran Park is we have acquired the land in 2015 and 2016. In July 2016 we sought the Minister's approval to defer construction as population growth was not commensurate with the proposal and costs. In 2019 the developer erected a sign to inform residents of future development. In 2020 it was confirmed that that sign had been tampered with to include incorrect commencement and completion information. The design and construction will commence this financial year, with an expected completion date of December 2022. Oran Park is currently serviced—

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Sorry, so the completion date is December this year?

MEGAN STIFFLER: Yes. Could I put a caveat on that?

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Yes.

MEGAN STIFFLER: With the current flooding impacts on supply chains and available trades, that is our estimated completion date, but we should also look at the pressures on the industry currently, because we have had terrible impacts on supply chains.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Can I take you back to that sort of time line you gave us where there was this decision back in 2016 to defer, I think you said based on population growth, which was not projected to justify it. Can you bring us up to speed on what that population projection growth is now and whether or not that station is well overdue or not, given the population growth out there?

MEGAN STIFFLER: I will have to take that on notice to give you specifics about the population growth. I would say we would have started the project based on it meeting the expectations of population to proceed. But I will take that on notice to confirm it.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Why was there a decision then in 2016 to slow things down? Was it because reality was not meeting with the population projections?

MEGAN STIFFLER: I think with all developments you need to take into account the viability of the development, especially with fire stations; you do not want to incur a cost to the public if you cannot justify the service.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: But was the money not already allocated in the budget?

MEGAN STIFFLER: Yes, but that does not mean you spend it unnecessarily.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: No, but the public would know. If you read the budget papers, the public would know, and there were media statements at the time saying X amount had been allocated, so the public would have been expecting a fire station, would they not?

MEGAN STIFFLER: I think the public would expect a well-spent public purse and, based on our experience, the figures were not justified at that time. But we are proceeding, as I have explained. If all supply chains, we do not have any hold-ups, December this year, Mr Buttigieg, Oran Park will be a fire station.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Acting Commissioner, can I ask you, if we were to go out to the site now, what would we see?

MEGAN STIFFLER: I have not got that before me. Again, on notice, I can give you the exact stage of the development.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Okay. And can you tell us how much was allocated in the initial budget allocation to the project?

MEGAN STIFFLER: I have got here, Mr Buttigieg, the Government has committed \$6.2 million.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: So \$6.2 million.

MEGAN STIFFLER: Which includes \$4.5 million in station construction; what we call a CAFS pumper, which is a compressed air foam pumper—because you like acronyms—and that was \$994,000; also a heavy hazardous material vehicle for \$750,000. So that totals your \$6.2 million.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: And when was that \$6.2 million allocated? In which budget?

MEGAN STIFFLER: We procured land in 2015-16. I will have to take that on notice. But part of that budget was spent in that year. I will take that on notice to confirm for you.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Because I have \$1.5 million being allocated to the project in the 2015 budget.

MEGAN STIFFLER: That was the procurement of land, yes.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: So does that fall into that \$6.2 million envelope or is that a precursor to the \$6.2 million?

MEGAN STIFFLER: Can I take that on notice, please?

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Yes, of course. And will Fire and Rescue NSW be provided with additional firefighting personnel to staff any new stations—so the example of Oran Park and potentially others? Do you get extra personnel?

MEGAN STIFFLER: For this particular project, recurrent funding for the 32 permanent firefighter positions has not been secured and is expected to cost \$3.6 million in the 2022-23 period, and \$4.9 million for the 2023-24 period.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Sorry, 32—

MEGAN STIFFLER: Sorry, 32 permanent firefighter positions to crew both of the appliances, and that is expected to cost \$3.6 million in 2022-23.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Yes, and \$4.9 million—

MEGAN STIFFLER: And \$4.9 million in 2023-24.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: So that human resource to realise the capital investment has been requested by Fire and Rescue but has not been acceded to by the Government. Is that correct?

MEGAN STIFFLER: We continue to talk with Treasury and our Minister with regard to that, the recurrent costs.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: So we potentially have a fire station that is finally delivered at the end of this year, hopefully, without any staff?

MEGAN STIFFLER: We currently do not have a recurrent budget—additional budget allocated to us.

(Short adjournment)

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Acting Commissioner, can I just take you back to that previous line of questioning where we were on Oran Park and you mentioned the vandalising of the sign, which has been raised in previous rounds of budget estimates. Could you just talk us through that? The implication was, I think, that someone vandalised the sign, which gave the public or anyone looking at the sign presumably a false impression that it was going to be completed earlier than it was otherwise planned. Could you just talk us through that again?

The Hon. WALT SECORD: I was miles away from it.

MEGAN STIFFLER: Mr Buttigieg, I was not here at that time of the signage. I do not have the full history of it. I do know that it misrepresented—my understanding is it had the incorrect commencement and completion date. For a full backstory, I will have to take that on notice and provide it to you at another time.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Your evidence was that the sign was changed, which gave a misleading impression of some sort of early completion date, but do we know what the projected date on the sign said?

MEGAN STIFFLER: No, sir. As I was not here at the time, I will need to take that on notice and I can give you the full story at another time.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: I have the infrastructure statement here in *Budget Paper No. 2* from 2015-16 and it has "Oran Park land and new station" and the start date is 2015 with a completion of 2018 and it is for \$4.4 million. The allocation for 2015-16 was, as we pointed out, \$1.5 million, but for the out years—that is, 2016-17 and 2017-18—the total was \$4.4 million. There was a specific start and completion date here. This is in the Government's own infrastructure statement in *Budget Paper No. 2* saying it would be completed by 2018 and the money was allocated. It makes that sign vandalising proposition a little bit dubious, does it not, if the money was allocated in that three-year envelope and there was a promised finish date of 2018. Can you see how people would be a bit suspicious of that excuse?

MEGAN STIFFLER: Again, I was not here at the time. I am not sure how you concluded it was suspicious if there was a sign tampered with. What I can confirm for you is that in 2015 and 2016, as I have previously said, \$1.5 million was used to procure the land. In July 2016, we sought, with the Minister's approval, to defer construction due to the population growth that was not commensurate with the proposal and costs. I would also like to point out—you asked me earlier to clarify whether the \$1.5 million was separate to the \$4.5 million construction or the \$6.2 million total we spoke about. I can confirm that the \$6.2 million is in addition to the \$1.5 million land acquisition, and all others I will have to take on notice, again, as I was not here.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Clearly costs have blown out because the original allocation, as I have just said to you—and this is from the Government's own budget—was \$4.4 million in a three-year funding envelope. So 2015-16 was the \$1.5 million for the land and then the balance of that \$4.4 million—\$4.4 million minus \$1.5 million is \$2.9 million over financial year 2016-17 and 2017-18 and the completion date was 2018. I remember going out there and this being raised. The sign was subsequently "apparently vandalised" post-2018, and yet the budget papers show that there was a completion date for 2018 in those first three years. It is a bit hard for the Government to argue, when it has allocated that \$4.4 million to be completed by 2018, that the sign was subsequently changed to imply that it was going to be an earlier date, when it is clearly stated here that the completion date was 2018.

MEGAN STIFFLER: I am just not following your conjecture. I do not understand, having not been here, what you are implying.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Your implication was that because the date was changed, then the original completion date before the sign was vandalised was much later than 2019. It was not because it is here in the budget papers saying it would be completed in 2018.

MEGAN STIFFLER: The line I read out to you, Mr Buttigieg, was, "In October 2019, the developer erected a sign to inform residents of future developments. In June 2020, it was confirmed that the sign had been tampered with, which included incorrect commencement and completion dates." That is what I said and I read from my notes. I am not sure what you are implying but I will have to get back to you.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Yes, but we have it here in documentation in the Government's own budget papers that they said that they would complete it by 2018.

MEGAN STIFFLER: Are you implying that the sign was not tampered—I do not know where your questioning is going.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: What I am saying is that the argument has been all along that this project should have been delivered years ago when it was promised. The idea that because a sign is tampered with and then it was not actually promised does not really gel with what the budget papers say. That is my argument.

MEGAN STIFFLER: I do not think they have been my words.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Okay. I want to take you to another item that has been raised in budget estimates prior and it is the report on the Tathra bushfires. Coming out of that report, there was a body called—have you been briefed on this?—the Emergency Services Board of Commissioners to look into the Tathra bushfires. There were 26 recommendations coming out of the inquiry, but then there was the Emergency Services Board of Commissioners which commissioned another body called Noetic to give an opinion on those recommendations, part of which was the coordination of appliances in terms of call centres and how those appliances are allocated. Are you aware of this?

MEGAN STIFFLER: I am aware of the Tathra coronial and the recommendations out of it.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: That Emergency Services Board of Commissioners commissioned a company called Noetic. Commissioner Fitzsimmons is familiar with this, I think, because we ascertained that the consultancies cost \$110,000 for that report, and I think that report was to ostensibly determine whether or not appliances were being coordinated and used as efficiently as they otherwise could be. We tried to get a hold of that report on several occasions. We had a couple of Standing Order 52s. We were told by Minister Elliott in those previous rounds of estimates that the document would be forthcoming. Subsequent to that, we were told that it was Cabinet-in-confidence. It does seem a little bit peculiar that a relatively low-level document about resource allocation would form part of Cabinet discussions and a Cabinet document for a fairly minor consultancy report. When the Standing Order 52 came back, all we got was a series of invoices which backed in what you, Commissioner Fitzsimmons, said about the cost; that was it. That report exists. Are you willing to provide that to the Committee? This is about the third, fourth or fifth time I have asked.

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: What I would say is that, my understanding is and respecting the convention of Cabinet confidentiality, I certainly will not be committing to providing the report. My understanding is, and the guidance I have received through previous requests and the SO 52s is, that it is deemed Cabinet-in-confidence.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Does it strike you as strange that a document like that would be deemed Cabinet-in-confidence?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: Cabinet-in-confidence applies across all manner of different documents.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: The recommendations of that report, have they actually been agreed to?

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: I do not want to compromise myself by commenting on the Noetic report, given what I understand to be the provisions of Cabinet-in-confidence. But what I can say in relation to the Keely inquiry is that the Government is investing monies into upgrading the Fire and Rescue computer-aided dispatch system—over \$18 million. There are further upgrades of another \$4 million for the RFS computer-aided dispatch system, another more than \$8 million to fast-track rollout of centralised dispatch arrangements and other support works associated with that review.

ROB ROGERS: I think also—if I might add, Mr Buttigieg?

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Yes.

ROB ROGERS: That report and that body of work was not about the recommendations per se; it was simply about call taking and dispatch.

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: Yes.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Yes.

ROB ROGERS: The recommendations were—

SHANE FITZSIMMONS: Accepted.

ROB ROGERS: —addressed and accepted; it was just that call taking and dispatch. There has been an evolution of work done between Fire and Rescue NSW and RFS to bring us closer together, to have full visibility of appliances, to ensure the principle of the community getting the fastest, most suitable appliance to help them whenever they need it, irrespective of what badge is on the side of the truck.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: That is why I am wondering why there is this shroud of secrecy. Because you would think for \$110,000—it is a lot of money, superficially. The taxpayers paid for this report, indirectly, and the report goes directly to what you have just outlined, Commissioner Rogers, that it is about coordinating appliances better and how we could get more efficient use of resources. Do you not think the public has a right to know what was in that report and whether or not what came out of that report has actually been implemented?

ROB ROGERS: Obviously I cannot talk to that and that is not under my responsibility. What I can suggest would be useful to provide on notice is the work that is being done between Fire and Rescue NSW and RFS on making sure we have got good synergy between the agencies, good visibility of appliances, and a clear, demonstrable body of work that will end up culminating with integrated CAD dispatch systems and that full visibility. So I think there is some really good work that has been done and I am quite comfortable that we could provide that in written format for you, so you would have confidence to see—

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: That would be helpful. Acting Commissioner Stiffler, perhaps I will just take you to some other issues I want to traverse here regarding properties. According to Fire and Rescue NSW's 2021 Strategic Asset Management Plan, which is known as the Fire and Rescue NSW Plan, Infrastructure NSW identified "low maturity" in Fire and Rescue NSW asset management systems. Can you talk us through that and speak to the reasons for that assessment and what is being done to remedy the situation?

MEGAN STIFFLER: Certainly. We have a body of work currently underway aligning our asset management plans across the expectations of government. Again, I was not here when the report was handed down. Part of my portfolio is to make sure that they are robust, mature, asset management plans, and that body of work is currently being undertaken in the areas that need some attention, Mr Buttigieg.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: What do they actually mean when they say "low maturity" in Fire and Rescue NSW asset management systems?

MEGAN STIFFLER: As I did not read the report—write the report rather, I will take that on notice and I will provide a proper summary of any area that they articulate what they mean by that statement.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Have you read the report?

MEGAN STIFFLER: I have read the report.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: So you did not have an interpretation on what they meant by "low maturity" when you read the report?

MEGAN STIFFLER: If I take that on notice, I can provide you actual quotes out of that report to best explain the author's intent of that statement.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Okay. The Fire and Rescue NSW plan establishes a 30 June 2022 deadline for Fire and Rescue NSW to have 100 per cent awareness of maintenance backlogs in work sites. How are Fire and Rescue NSW capturing workplace health and safety concerns in this process? Are you consulting firefighters and their representatives for the full picture? I know I asked you this before, but apparently there is a 30 June 2022 deadline for capturing WHS and safety concerns and having 100 per cent awareness of the maintenance backlog. How are we dealing with that?

MEGAN STIFFLER: I think when you first posed the question, it was how are we tracking for that delivery, is that correct?

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: That would certainly be helpful, yes.

MEGAN STIFFLER: It is currently a target of the project team to achieve that. You can imagine the level of energy that we have been putting into the Northern Rivers events.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Yes.

MEGAN STIFFLER: So all of our projects are being reviewed to make sure that they are still on track. Being an operational organisation with 90 per cent of our staff being firefighters, we are agile to respond to those large events. So I will have to take it on notice, once that has been reviewed, to make sure we are still on track for that deliverable.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: What is the consultative mechanism with firefighters and their reps?

MEGAN STIFFLER: Under legislation, we have got HSRs—or health and safety reps—and they are on our governance structure for workplace health and safety, so they are part of our reviews. They are involved in committees.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: How often do they meet?

MEGAN STIFFLER: One moment, I will have to take that on notice. I am not on the committee.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Okay. Are you aware that in the Minister's own seat of Cootamundra the local Junee station does not have a working shower to adhere to Fire and Rescue NSW's post-incident decontamination policy?

MEGAN STIFFLER: As a deputy commissioner, in my substantive role I do not know about specific items for each station. I am more than happy if you have got a series of stations with outstanding issues for you to provide it, and I can provide a fulsome answer on each of those stations.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Well, this is the Junee station apparently, and it is—

MEGAN STIFFLER: It is a working shower which is the issue?

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: It says it has not got a working shower to adhere to the post-incident decontamination policy. This was one of the things I think you gave in your examples, so would that bump it up that priority list?

MEGAN STIFFLER: I think when I gave you the answer about all the different factors, as I said, every year every station is assessed on their current facilities and, taking into consideration all the other aspects of the assessment, it could bump it up and it might not; I am not sure. But if there is a WH&S outstanding issue, it is a priority for this organisation that we address those issues. With Junee, again it is a specific item for a specific station and I will need to get further information and take it on notice for you.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: I know that you are relatively new to the role but, given what you have heard and the report, are you starting to raise eyebrows at the due diligence process of managing these assets and the governance process?

MEGAN STIFFLER: I think, leading this section of work, my role as an executive is to make sure it is a robust, unquestionable process, which is exactly the process I am undertaking at the moment with KPMG. I want to provide assurance, not only for myself as the accountable officer but also to the commissioner in his normal role, that we are addressing issues in a timely manner and addressing critical workplace health and safety outstanding items. So I believe that the work I have undertaken in the time I have been in the organisation is testament to the focus I have in this area.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: How much are you paying KPMG to do this review?

MEGAN STIFFLER: An exact figure—I will take that on notice.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: What value do you place on internal consultation with employees and staff vis-a-vis consultants coming in and potentially sucking up, in my experience, millions of dollars' worth of taxpayers' money sometimes for no real effect? I mean, you have the subject matter expertise there, living and breathing it every day—pardon the pun. Isn't it easy to just ask them where the problems are?

MEGAN STIFFLER: I think independent reviews and assessments of processes gives a level of assurance that is expected of a modern public service. You asked me about my personal focus on consultation with staff and reps. I see my whole division as a service to our operational firefighters. Without consultation, we cannot meet their needs. It rates very highly, not only in my own estimation. But from my view of the Executive since I have joined this organisation, consultation is a focus I see in everything we do and we talk about it regularly as a group, and we see the value of effective, genuine consultation.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: I guess my question is do you think there is potential there to perhaps get higher-quality information about where the problems are and save the taxpayer a lot of money in the same breath?

MEGAN STIFFLER: I think we are already achieving consultation. In that robust system, I told you about how we have the two phases. We have the staff at the front line contributing to the assessment of their own facilities. We have HSRs located across our regions. We consult with industrial bodies. We have expertise within our organisation. All of that consultation comes together for the best output. I believe that giving assurance that that is all working seamlessly is part of my role.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Can you take that cost for the KPMG analysis on notice?

MEGAN STIFFLER: Of course.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: The Fire and Rescue NSW plan that we spoke about, which has the 30 June deadline—

MEGAN STIFFLER: The asset management plan?

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Yes. It refers to options to merge emergency services assets through Resilience NSW. What is your understanding of that?

MEGAN STIFFLER: Is that a direct quote from the plan?

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: It talks about merging emergency service assets under the umbrella of Resilience NSW. Can you elaborate on that?

MEGAN STIFFLER: That is not a familiar line that jumps—from my reading. Do you know what page or reference you are referring to?

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: No, I do not have it in front of me. But it also says that Fire and Rescue NSW has experienced "a significant funding gap for an extended period of time". Does that ring a bell?

MEGAN STIFFLER: That would be an accurate assessment over a long period of time.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: What do you think the obstacles are to Fire and Rescue NSW getting appropriate budgets and resources to protect the community and firefighters? We touched on this before and you did say how you have put in submissions for the staffing of the extra stations, about which discussions are ongoing. What is the roadblock here? Is it the Minister not having enough pull with Treasury? What is the issue?

MEGAN STIFFLER: I have not personally had a roadblock. Since I have joined the organisation I am having productive conversations through our executive director of finance. I have not personally seen this roadblock that you speak of.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: No, but you gave us an example earlier where you actually put on record in evidence that there will not be the budget allocated to fund the human resources that are necessary to staff the stations.

MEGAN STIFFLER: Currently.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: As we stand here today, there is no money in the budget to provide the people to man those stations.

MEGAN STIFFLER: Additional budget, no.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: If that is not a roadblock—you could use another adjective, but that is a problem, is it not?

MEGAN STIFFLER: As I said, at this stage the conversations continue. The station is not currently open. I personally—I say it again—have not seen a roadblock since I have joined the organisation. I am not sure about the quote.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: But that is not the only issue, is it? That was just one emblematic example—Oran Park. But if the asset management plan states that Fire and Rescue NSW has experienced "a significant funding gap for an extended period of time", that raises questions, does it not, around the Government's priorities with respect to Fire and Rescue NSW and providing adequate funding?

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Point of order: Surely the acting commissioner cannot be asked questions about the budget process as between the Minister and the Treasury or Cabinet, which the member specifically referred to.

The ACTING CHAIR: Any member may ask any question, particularly relating to budgets. This is budget estimates. The witness can answer as they see fit as long as they are directly relevant to the subject matter. So far the exchange between the member and the witnesses have fallen within that framework.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Does that include opinions around the budget process?

The ACTING CHAIR: The member can ask. If it is beyond a witness' knowledge, they can say so. They can answer in whatever way they see most appropriate.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Just on that, presumably the Minister does not make these decisions in a vacuum. She is not privy to what is going on operationally unless she speaks to people like you who are in touch with what is going on on a day-to-day basis. So this is a kind of artificial construct we are making, is it not?

MEGAN STIFFLER: You are also asking me to comment on historical budget allocation. I cannot pass comment on that because I was not in the organisation nor involved in conversations advising either the Minister or Treasury. So I cannot comment on historical funding.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: No. But with respect, we get this all the time when new people come into roles and say, "That's all before my time." I would have thought that one of the first things that happens is you get a thorough briefing on what the historical problems are and, if there are funding shortfalls, on what needs to be addressed. So I do think it is a fair line of questioning. I understand you do not want to be in a compromising position where you might be undercutting the Minister in terms of her responsibilities, but I am hearing here that there is a chronic funding shortfall. I am trying to ascertain the reasons why those requests, presumably, are being constantly rejected over an extended period of time.

MEGAN STIFFLER: I have stated previously that there have been historical shortfalls of funding. What I cannot give you is the answer that you are looking for on why that is. I do not have a historical experience with those budget processes.

The ACTING CHAIR: Just on that, is there correspondence held by your agency where Treasury discloses the reasons why certain enhancements of funding were not acceptable? Can you take that on notice.

MEGAN STIFFLER: I will have to take on notice with regard to historical business cases and why they were not progressed through the budget process.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: In 2017 the Fire and Rescue NSW Commissioner made commitments to workers. Sorry, we have been over this. This is the female facilities.

MEGAN STIFFLER: "Ablutions", I believe we have identified, Mr Buttigieg.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Yes. This morning the fire stations were identified, in the context of the overall picture of assets and technology, as just bricks and mortar. Is that an attitudinal issue that is feeding into this lack of amenities for female staff—the fact that they are just bricks and mortar? So it is not just about the bricks and mortar; it is about the appliances and the technology and how you use resources effectively?

MEGAN STIFFLER: No.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: So this is an absolute priority for you and the Minister?

MEGAN STIFFLER: Absolutely.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: This morning the Minister mentioned the recommendations from the bushfire royal commission. Can you tell us what the implementation status is for Fire and Rescue NSW appliances being retrofitted with turnover cabin protections for bushfires? Is this the system whereby the appliance is enveloped in water to protect it?

ROB ROGERS: If I could just suggest, it was not a royal commission; it was a State inquiry.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: The State inquiry, yes. A recommendation of that was that these appliances be retrofitted?

ROB ROGERS: Yes, for both agencies.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Where are we up to with the implementation of that?

ROB ROGERS: Are you asking RFS or Fire and Rescue?

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Fire and Rescue or RFS—whoever wants to answer it.

ROB ROGERS: Well, they are different appliances and they have a different program.

MEGAN STIFFLER: I do have that here, if you give me a moment.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Sure.

MEGAN STIFFLER: The bushfire inquiry provided \$3.3 million in 2021-22 to replace six trucks and \$5.7 million in 2021 for 10 bushfire fleet vehicles to be replaced. That was to bring our class 1 tankers up to that standard you spoke of.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: The money has been allocated. Has it been spent and have the appliances materialised?

MEGAN STIFFLER: Six of the appliances to replace those tankers that did not have protection have been fulfilled.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Six? Is that six out of a total of—

MEGAN STIFFLER: I am getting those exact figures. Correction: The six fleet vehicles have been ordered and are currently being built.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: The shortfall in that protective system was for six vehicles, was it?

MEGAN STIFFLER: Yes.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Are they on track to be delivered?

MEGAN STIFFLER: I have been updated. We have no retrofitting of Fire and Rescue class 1 tankers. Thirty-three new tankers were recommended, the first 18 have been completed and there are more pending for that particular update.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Instead of retrofitting, you ordered 33 new and, of those, 18 have been delivered. Is that correct?

MEGAN STIFFLER: Thirty-three were recommended. The first 18 have been completed.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Is the difference on track to be delivered? And by what FY?

MEGAN STIFFLER: I will have to take that on notice.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: In the fleet asset management plan, what input or influence does the age of the fleet contribute in decision-making?

ROB ROGERS: Were you not interested in the RFS figures?

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: I am sorry. Go ahead.

ROB ROGERS: If you are not interested, that is fine.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: No, I am interested. I glossed over it.

The ACTING CHAIR: You have given him an opening.

ROB ROGERS: Only if you are interested. The bushfire inquiry noted some 2,000 RFS appliances did not meet the latest standards. Of those, there has been—

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Two thousand?

ROB ROGERS: Yes.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: And a subset of those would have been this protective—

ROB ROGERS: Yes. They did not meet the latest—they had iterations. Some of them had protective spray, some did not have wheel protection and some did not have curtains. There was a whole suite of different evolution of safety systems. Of those, there have been more than 300 tankers that have been ordered to replace older tankers, and there have also been another 100 refurbishments. That body of work is going to take some years to get through, though, it is fair to say.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: So, 2,000 and then 300 plus 100. What about the rest?

ROB ROGERS: It is a body of work to continue going in the years to come. That is obviously something we are very focused on: Making sure our people have the safest appliances.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Of those 2,000, do we have a number on what was required for that burnover cabin protection?

ROB ROGERS: I would have to get that for you on notice, Mr Buttigieg.

The ACTING CHAIR: Commissioner Rogers, you mentioned it would take some years to work through this. How many years at the current rate of progress?

ROB ROGERS: To get to the retrofit point we are looking at eight years. Obviously we want to then keep a higher level of production to keep the average fleet down and continue. Our strategy is, for 25-year-old trucks, a midlife refurb between 10 and 15 years old to make sure we can upgrade them to whatever the latest standard looks like at that time. That way we keep our people in the safest equipment because these people are volunteering their time and I think it is only fair that we give them the best protection available.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Could I take you back to the question I asked before Commissioner Rogers helpfully reminded me that I had glossed over the RFS. But on the age of the fleet—and you touched on it, commissioner, in terms of that 10 to 15 years that I think you said—what about the NSW Rural Fire Service? What factor does the age of the fleet play in determining upgrade or asset management?

MEGAN STIFFLER: Age of fleet is definitely one measure. It is also the amount of use an appliance undertakes on a regular basis. For example, if a high-incident station is due to replace their appliance, that appliance could be moved to an area with less activity. Again, it is a dynamic asset movement. When you look at the investment we have made on class 1 tankers and aerial appliances over the last 12 months, the ages of those two items in the fleet have dropped dramatically. Now we can focus on other parts of our fleet and address the age of that fleet.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Are you able to tell us what the average age of the fleet would be?

MEGAN STIFFLER: Certainly. Is there a particular type of appliance you are interested in?

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Probably aggregated across the whole fleet, but if there are subsets that is probably helpful.

MEGAN STIFFLER: I think aggregation poses a problem for you because aerials, for example, have much less activity and have different impacts on age. Let us talk about class 1 tankers. The operational average years, currently, of the 117 in service is 9.07 years. The oldest in that class is 17.29 years. If we look at aerial pumpers, we have eight in service. The operational average of aerial pumpers is 14.99 years. If you look at aerials, we have 10 in service. The average age is 12.06 years. We have class 3 pumpers. There are 125 in the fleet. The average age is 8.19 years. We have our class 2 pumpers. There are 215 in the fleet. The average age is 12.39 years. We have special vehicles, some 79 vehicles. They have an average age of 8.03.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Thank you. I might just wind up with a set of questions to you, Commissioner Rogers, just to round out the day. We will put the rest on notice. Can you tell us how many staff vacancies there are across RFS that remain unfilled?

ROB ROGERS: I will have to give you that on notice if I could. I do not know off the top of my head. Sorry.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Do you have any idea of the ballpark ratio of frontline positions to back-office positions that would be unfilled?

ROB ROGERS: No. I am sorry. I do not have that. I would have to get that on notice.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: There are reports that the RFS is facing staff shortages due to deficiencies with current recruitment practices. What deficiencies are you aware of in recruitment within the RFS?

ROB ROGERS: I am not aware of any deficiencies, to be honest. We keep modernising our recruitment to offer operational positions. We have just started a brand-new program of recruitment for our operational officer positions, which is more our entry-level operational positions. The first group of those is currently going through Dubbo Academy. It is a 13-week program. We had record numbers of people that applied for those jobs. They were quite competitive. So far it looks like a really good group coming through. So I actually think we have got some really good future ahead. We have redesigned our roles to make sure that we are giving better support and better training to our staff so that they can, obviously, feel supported by the organisation and that they can do their duties better, rather than having to be trained by people that are already busy doing work.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Would it be fair to say that there is a deficiency in filling staff vacancies, particularly frontline staff, or is that an unfair statement?

ROB ROGERS: No. I think it is fair to say that things like COVID has had an impact on our recruitment and filling roles simply because our training at Dubbo was dislocated. Dubbo academy was turned into an emergency operations centre for the health emergency for COVID in western New South Wales. There has been

quite a few barriers that have held up what we have done. So I think it is fair to say that we have had a pause due to COVID, but we are very much now moving ahead, filling all of our roles.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: We will leave it at this. Of the \$700 million that was allocated to RFS from the bushfire initiative inquiry, how much of that has been spent on staff recruitment? Do we know?

ROB ROGERS: I would have the figures. I do not think I have them here, but I can certainly give you—there are specific allocations for staffing. I probably can give you some of that. For example, there was \$16 million over five years for mental health recruitment for psychologists to assist us do better with our mental health. There was \$42 million over three years for mitigation crews, additional people to help prepare and carry out burns. There was \$24 million over five years for people to do audit and compliance of risk plans and hazard complaints on managed land, things like government land. There were some additional fire behaviour specialists in area commands. I think there was two additional where we did not have them. We have put those in. There were some people to help with fire trails. I can give you a proper response to it. These things, I am sure you imagine, are very closely tracked.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: That would be helpful. Thanks, Chair.

The ACTING CHAIR: That is all right. Does the Government wish to use its allocation?

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: No. I think I will let that go this afternoon. Thank you.

The ACTING CHAIR: Just on this occasion?

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: On this occasion.

The ACTING CHAIR: Thanks, commissioners, acting commissioners and deputy commissioners for coming along and for participating. A number of questions have been taken on notice. The secretariat will be in touch with you about those, just to make sure there is no ambiguity about what you have been asked to provide to the Committee by way of further or additional information. With that, the Committee stands adjourned, at 4.24 p.m.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

The Committee proceeded to deliberate.