

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2022 Flood Event in Victoria

Shepparton – Wednesday 13 September 2023

MEMBERS

Sonja Terpstra – Chair

David Ettershank – Deputy Chair

Ryan Batchelor

Melina Bath

Gaelle Broad

Wendy Lovell

Samantha Ratnam

Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell

Sheena Watt

PARTICIPATING MEMBERS

John Berger

Ann-Marie Hermans

Joe McCracken

Evan Mulholland

Rachel Payne

WITNESSES

Jan Phillips, Manager, and

Jacqui Kiss, Administrator, Mooroopna Education and Activity Centre.

The CHAIR: I declare open the committee's public hearing for the Inquiry into the 2022 Flood Event in Victoria. This public hearing is for the Environment and Planning Committee, an all-party committee of the Parliament looking into the October flood event. We will be providing a report to Parliament, which will include recommendations to the government. Please ensure that mobile phones have been switched to silent and that background noise is minimised.

I would like to begin this hearing by respectfully acknowledging the Aboriginal peoples, the traditional custodians of the various lands we are gathered on today, and pay my respects to their ancestors, elders and families. I particularly welcome any elders or community members who are here today to impart their knowledge of this issue to the committee. I welcome any members of the public in the gallery and remind those in the room to please be respectful of proceedings and to remain silent at all times.

For those of you who are giving evidence today, all evidence that is taken is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during this hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during this hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat the same things, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded, and you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. Transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website.

I will just take the opportunity now to introduce myself, and other committee members will introduce themselves to you as well. I am Sonja Terpstra. I am the Chair of the Environment and Planning Committee.

Melina BATH: Melina Bath, Eastern Victoria Region. Hello.

Jan PHILLIPS: Hello.

Gaëlle BROAD: Hi, I am Gaëlle Broad, Member for Northern Victoria.

Sheena WATT: Hello. I am Sheena Watt, Member for Northern Metropolitan.

Wendy LOVELL: Wendy Lovell – I know you both.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, Member for Northern Victoria Region.

Samantha RATNAM: Afternoon. Samantha Ratnam, Member for Northern Metropolitan.

The CHAIR: All right. With that, we welcome your opening remarks. If you could please keep them to 10 minutes, I will give you a 2-minute warning as we approach the end of the time. Could you also please just state your name and the organisation you are representing for the Hansard record. Over to you.

Jan PHILLIPS: Okay. Thank you very much. I am Jan Phillips. I am the Manager of the Mooroopna Education and Activity Centre, and we were the centre of Mooroopna during the floods. I will just say: our evidence is our experience, so I was not really sure how or what to – I apologise if whenever I talk about it, I get really emotional.

The CHAIR: No, no. That is fine.

Jan PHILLIPS: I will try not to do that. On 14 October last year I was contacted by COGS and asked if we were available for emergency –

The CHAIR: Who is COGS, sorry?

Jan PHILLIPS: City of Greater Shepparton, sorry.

The CHAIR: That is all right.

Jan PHILLIPS: My apologies. I hate acronyms, and here I am using one.

The CHAIR: It just helps all of us to understand what you mean.

Jan PHILLIPS: I will refer to them as 'COGS', so the City of Greater Shepparton.

The CHAIR: Now we know.

Jan PHILLIPS: They asked whether we would be available in the case of an emergency, because the floodwaters were coming. I said, 'Yes, absolutely.' There was a sense that this could not be happening. I think that that would be another area that we could probably pursue, a greater understanding of what is going on. The 15th actually felt a bit like Christmas Day. Everybody was kind of excited with the water coming, and it looked really beautiful. And then it was not beautiful. Then it was terrible. I watched the levee banks down at the Swans football club breach, and it was stunning. And then it was not stunning. Then it was really scary. The water was gorgeous, but it was horrendous at the same time. We were dealing with all that. The causeway was closed. Mooroopna became quite isolated. We needed to do something for our community. McLennan Street was flooded. We had essential services that had to come into us, like the one and only GP service, the local pharmacy, local pathology and other allied health services. We were able to provide for them. We were also able to do food security.

We were able to be the central place for all knowledge, and one of the things I would say to the inquiry is: who is in charge? That was really difficult to know. We assumed COGS initially. They were fantastic. They were doing what they could, because they probably were not prepared for how big this was going to be. One of the things our community struggled with was where to get the information, so we took it upon ourselves to set up as the place of all knowledge. In fact we became the house of hugs, because we were not only all knowledge but we were also emotional and physical support to our local community once they could get to us. We demanded services. Thank God we got them. Service Victoria came to us. The federal government set up face-to-face opportunities for members of our community to come in and actually have that person that they could talk to. I was instructed pretty quickly that there was an emergency number so that they could be registered. That was Windermere services, and I am sure they did a great job. But like all the services that set up very quickly around that time, they set up but they did not have the personnel. They were scrambling like we were scrambling. It felt like bureaucracy bingo. You did not know whom you needed to talk to. You did not know who was in charge. People would not make decisions, and I would just refer back to the last speakers, because they picked it in one: no-one can tell you anything, probably because they did not have the knowledge, but we just did not know. And it was just in that early period. It sorted itself out eventually, and people did an enormously fabulous job during that time. But it took time, and I think if there is anything with this inquiry, could we overcome that, to know who is the place where all the knowledge is.

Communications need to be improved, and I think they need to come out of COGS. They need to be very clear, and they did it but not in those initial stages, those initial few days, which meant that a lot of gossip started happening. The Undera people did a great job with their presentation, but I was thinking I do not know how many times I heard that Loch Garry should be bombed. That would fix all our problems. There was a lot of gossip – 'This should happen,' 'In the '94 floods,' 'In the '73 floods' – but it was a flood in its own right. It was not the same as those floods. If we had information – and not assuming that it would come out on a computer or on Facebook. Our community here in Mooroopna are not all IT savvy, so they actually need that physical presence of the information. We ended up being a well-oiled machine eventually, being able to provide a lot for our community, but we did not have the resources, because we are a really poor neighbourhood house. If you know anything about neighbourhood houses, we run on the smell of an oily rag, and we were trying to provide as much service to the Mooroopna community and district as we could but on limited resources.

What else can I tell you? We did become the house of hugs. It was really happening. Colin Brooks will hate me for saying this, but he came and he was fabulous, but as he was walking out he said, 'Your place is like a Neighbourhood House on steroids.' I did ask Dan Andrews if I could quote him as saying that, and he told me I could.

The CHAIR: It is all right, I am sure they will forgive you.

Jan PHILLIPS: There were lots of great things, but one of the things that I want to highlight is the information. A really good example of that was that we had a storm a couple of months back – probably three months actually – and some flooding came up, and I have got to say, I was really triggered at the time. And I think that basic information needs to go out to the community. Our road, Alexandra Street, flooded, and there were cars zooming through it and the wash was coming – our building got flooded, as well as having to provide services to our community. I was so triggered by that. I put on my high-vis vest and I was out in the street, in the rain, doing this, stopping traffic. So that knowledge needs to be passed on to the community. We were a community that just recently got flooded, and people were driving at 40 and 50 kilometres an hour through floodwater. The wake from that was so destructive during the actual floods; I mean, windows along McLennan Street were broken, and that added to the damage that happened to those businesses.

What else can I tell you? We continue to provide services to our community; it is not over. In fact it is as equally traumatic today as it was on 15 October. So what I would ask from you guys is better communication: who is in charge, how can we work together. Certainly, I will hand over, because Jacqui wants to say a few words too. It is all right, I have given you 2 minutes.

Melina BATH: We will ask her questions.

Jacqui KISS: Thanks for letting me speak today, guys. I am here to give some evidence as a Mooroopna resident, but more importantly as a person who is a volunteer and an employee at Mooroopna Education and Activity Centre. In the first days after the floods, I was the only person on this side of the river with a key, so I went and opened up and we created our own relief centre and did all that stuff and it was great. Specifically, I think future planning needs to address the trauma of this event and past events, and address the point Jan just made about even rain being triggering. So on Friday, at MEAC – I am very technologically savvy and very involved in the community, and we knew it was going to flood the following day or following days, but even we were quite unaware of where sandbags were available. That information was not disseminated very well until Saturday. I drove up towards the train station on the Friday afternoon, and some local businesses had sandbagged themselves, but we did not know where they were coming from, and we did not know how to sandbag.

On Saturday I was out delivering flowers with my dad for my sister's local florist, and we went to the hardware store and got more gaffer tape, in case we needed to gaffer tape up the vents in our bricks. It was like the day COVID hit Shepparton, it was eerie. There were huge lines at the showgrounds to get sandbags. We decided to get some sandbags back in Mooroopna for our own house, and we sacrificed them for my sister's business in McLennan Street. We were successful –

The CHAIR: Sorry, that is the timer, but keep going. I will give you another two.

Jacqui KISS: When we returned to the shop, one of my sister's friends mentioned that some people needed to evacuate or they were going to get flooded. We did not. We put some bricks on our driveway when we got home. We know that our street floods when it rains, and we went, 'Oh, when it reaches that brick, it'll be bad. When it reaches those three bricks, that will be pretty bad,' and it did not, so we did not do anything. We were aware Sunday morning that other houses had flooded badly on Saturday night, and we still did nothing. By 7:30 on Sunday Martin went, 'Oh, you'd better come look at this,' and I walked out to a wall of water, because one of the levee banks had breached. And that stuff, it cannot be stopped, and we cannot control that. Every flood is going to be different. Every natural disaster is going to be different. Maybe if there could be some recommendations regarding the dissemination of information early on and how serious this could be for everyone. In MEAC we see a lot of people saying, 'I don't need help 'cause I wasn't affected that badly.' Some of those people lost their houses and their livelihoods. But everyone in the community has actually been affected, and they are not going to be prepared to be prepared and to learn how to be prepared until we can get them to accept their trauma and the impact this event has had on everyone.

I am going to ask for some recommendations about education on how to sandbag, if we are talking specifically about floods. Preparing the community for now – what will be a central point of information and relief., so like Jan said, who can they come to locally and who can we call for information. We need to allow people in the recovery period, in order to be prepared better, to vent their stories and their anger in an appropriately

supported, professional environment. We did that post floods through an agency that came in, and we dealt with people and their emotional states and all that kind of thing, but it actually needs to be ongoing. We need to make people aware of those events who do not have Facebook, who cannot use computers and do not use their mobile phones and do not check their letterbox. We need to think about everyone, and those who do not understand English or cannot read or write. Maybe then people will be ready for next time. But everyone did a fantastic job. We can all make recommendations until the cows come home, and we will get there, but every time is going to be different. We all just need to rally together as a state, as a nation and as a town.

The CHAIR: Awesome. Thanks so much for that. Ms Watt, first question to you.

Sheena WATT: Hi. Thank you both for being here. Jacqui, you said a lot of points that really hit home very, very strongly, and the one that I wanted to talk about was the social, emotional and psychological health of the community afterwards and how there was the support after. Can you talk to me about how long that was in place for, and do you have any –

Jan PHILLIPS: It still is.

Sheena WATT: It is still? The one that you were talking about, yes – the agency one.

Jacqui KISS: We are still doing it, but the agency who came and did it were here for a week.

Sheena WATT: Sorry, I was referring to the agency one and then to understand about what you do – so one week, you said?

Jacqui KISS: One week.

Sheena WATT: And where did that come from?

Jacqui KISS: APMHA.

Sheena WATT: Okay, great.

Jacqui KISS: We had people come in – we set them up in the foyer. It is a horrible thing to say, but lots of people were saying, ‘It would be better if this was a bushfire, because I would have lost everything and I’d have no choices. I wouldn’t be getting evacuated from my house in seven days, told to leave.’

Sheena WATT: Now the ongoing work that you do, can you talk to me a little bit about that? What does that look like, and where does the support come from for you to develop programs and recovery work? It is incredibly challenging work. Is it something that you have come to yourself through your own lived experience, or do you work with other neighbourhood houses in other areas, like the Rochester one that we heard from at the last inquiry? I am just interested to understand.

Jan PHILLIPS: Well, we are not working with the Rochester one. We work in conjunction with them.

Sheena WATT: In conjunction, but they are people that you are –

Jan PHILLIPS: We have had a couple of mutual opportunities, not that we are working with them, but we have made sure that they know, and they have made sure we have known.

Sheena WATT: And you have some relationships.

Jan PHILLIPS: We have a relationship, yes. And we beg, borrow and steal, anywhere – if I see something, I swoop on it. Swoop Phillips, that is me. Certainly as a team, yes.

Jacqui KISS: I have been a volunteer at MEAC since 2013, and since the floods I have received payment for 8 hours a week. I have put in 30-plus, and most of that is supporting the community in their post-flood recovery. That is because I am a local, so people trust locals. I also have a background in nursing, psych nursing, mental health rehabilitation and working in small communities. I worked up at Numurkah for five years. So that is where my experience comes from. I spent a lot of time recently searching for some of the agencies that train psychologists and social workers and stuff, seeing if we can get provisional psychologists

and telehealth and all that kind of thing, but a lot of the problem when I contact those companies is they do not ring you back, they do not email you back, and they say, 'Oh, we don't deal with trauma.'

Sheena WATT: Okay. That is something worth noting. I am sure there are plenty of questions from my panel.

The CHAIR: I will just follow on from that line of questioning in regard to trying to get support. As you say, your background is as a mental health nurse. Some people will reach out, some people will not. It might affect someone six months or nine months down the track. Again, we are looking for recommendations from people about what we should be looking at, but how do you think you could best manage that, because there will always be people in those different categories, and some people will never reach out.

Jan PHILLIPS: One of the things we were able to do was that we were – and I do not mind saying this – superstars with the power saving bonus, so we had community –

The CHAIR: Good on you. Awesome. Yes, it is a great initiative, isn't it?

Jan PHILLIPS: Absolutely, yes. I do not mind patting myself on the back, and Jac, for what we have been able to achieve with that. But in doing that, people actually come in to us. We are actually able to speak to them personally. We look at their addresses and we say, 'How did you go?' And they will say, 'All right', or they are able to actually debrief in our offices and then we can look at what supports – because we grassroots everything. That is one of the things that I will tell them – 'I'm not going to be your answer, but we are grassroots and we probably can find someone that can help you.' Can I just ask – this is one of the things that has come up. We have had the state government in doing some extra work with the extra funding or grants available to people who were uninsured. That finished on 31 July. Now, I know there has to be an end date, but oh, my god, I have had at least 10 people in since then –

Jacqui KISS: It ended on the 28th.

Wendy LOVELL: Some people are only just coming to grips with things now.

Jan PHILLIPS: Yes. They can only just talk about it. There is no time limit on how long – one of the workers was telling me how he judges whether they should have been in before the 31st or not, and that just sort of blew my mind a little bit, only because I do not know how you can decide, 'No, you're not exceptional circumstances because of A, B or C.'

The CHAIR: I know your background is in nursing. It is very fortunate that you are able to use those skills, and you value-add to your role, actually, at the neighbourhood house. How are you both being supported in that role? You are well suited because of your previous background, but do you have mental health first aid training? And then how do you support each other, because you need to debrief from what you are hearing and how you are supporting people. I am looking at you and you are laughing. I am thinking the answer is going to be 'Nothing.'

Jan PHILLIPS: No, it is the house of hugs.

The CHAIR: But there is no formal structure where you are able to debrief or to get support for the support you are providing to others, is that right?

Jan PHILLIPS: Personally my support has been being able to talk about it in places like this, and I have done a lot of talking about it. I am not saying that I do it well, because I do not. If I did, we would have an answer straightaway and we would fix it. But during that time, I spoke on the ABC and they were great. They reinforced that what we were doing was okay. Council have been wonderful. They have actually kind of let us know that what we were doing was right – because we were doing it a bit blindly, really. I tried to keep them informed all the time because I made the assumption that council were in charge. I still do not know who that person is.

The CHAIR: That is my next question. There has been a bit of a theme about preparedness but also response. There is no overarching plan that anyone can point to and go, 'All right, I know who's responsible for this, this and this.' Do you think it is a good idea to have an overarching plan but also individual plans? We are also hearing that people do not seem to think of floods in the same way as fire. They think floods are not as bad,

but in fact the after-effects of a flood could be that you have to now demolish parts of your house and rebuild that, and you could be cut off. Sometimes a fire takes it all away and it is done quickly. So they are quite different circumstances, but I am hearing that people do not have individual evacuation plans or have not pre-thought or prepared for an emergency. Is that what you are hearing?

Jacqui KISS: But so many people are not ready to engage in that at the moment.

The CHAIR: But not now. Even before this, though, there was no –

Jacqui KISS: Yes, we were told there is the app and you can look up the flood levels and stuff. Well, I cannot. It is unreliable and many addresses are not listed, and people cannot read the printout. So in preparing people for future floods, whether that be before this flood – and the portal did exist before the flood – or for future events, we actually need technology that works if we are going to direct people to those things.

The CHAIR: But not necessarily technology – you could have a piece of paper in your house that says, ‘This is what I’m going to do in the event of an emergency.’

Jacqui KISS: The point of the portal was that you could print those things and make your plan.

The CHAIR: But you could handwrite it, right? You can think, ‘If something’s coming, do I get out now?’ That is kind of what I am talking about.

Jacqui KISS: Yes.

Jan PHILLIPS: I was just going to say: Anna Bligh had this thing about how to be prepared for a flood. It resonated with me, but I was thinking, ‘It’s not going to work for everybody’ – always have 300 bucks stashed somewhere, because that is a hotel room, that is a load of groceries, that is filling up your car. Our community would not have \$300.

Wendy LOVELL: They have not got it to stash.

Jan PHILLIPS: But it is not a bad idea if they can. I just thought of something else.

The CHAIR: That is all right. It will come back to you, I am sure. I will move on because I know people have got other questions. Ms Lovell.

Wendy LOVELL: I am going to talk plan as well. I have to say, you guys are triggering memories for me as well. Even as I look at the audience, I see Vicki over there, who I saw mucking out her daughter’s shop in McLennan Street, and Simon, who was just so angry that Mooroopna had not received the attention that it should have. The community meeting was at MEAC a few weeks ago. There is a lot of anger still there in the community – people who are not getting the help they need, and people wanting a plan that is Mooroopna specific. Obviously the water is here before it is in Shepparton. Shepparton is downstream of Mooroopna, yet we measure from the Shepparton gauge, and people were unhappy about that. Where do you fit into the Shepparton plan? Do you fall through the cracks? Does there need to be Mooroopna-specific plan?

Jan PHILLIPS: There absolutely needs to be a Mooroopna-specific plan. Can I just give you an example of a fellow who probably let you in today: Ted McIntyre. He was 15 years old and walking around knee deep in water in Lenne Street 55 years ago because there were drainage problems. The same drainage problems are happening today. The Mooroopna people from that area – and probably across Mooroopna – are incredibly angry because the council in their budget has a \$200,000 feasibility study of the Lenne Street area, and it is like, ‘What the?’. It is hard to have confidence in the authorities when we are talking 55 years later, and three significant floods since – it has continued to flood regularly in that time, but we are talking significant floods – and nothing has been done. So you probably can understand why there is some anger in our community when there are things like that happening. And they do not know when it is going to be fixed. No-one has actually said, ‘Yes, it’s going to be redone.’ Nothing.

Jacqui KISS: I think the formation of the Mooroopna flood recovery committee from council has actually been a very good move. It will hopefully allow us to develop our own plan that would sit underneath the City of Greater Shepparton plan with specific criteria and a plan of our own.

Jan PHILLIPS: And listen to the community – what do they want? Authorities can say, ‘Well, this is what’s going to happen,’ but ‘What does the community actually want, and can we meet that?’

Wendy LOVELL: I did not feel it was happening the other night at the meeting at your facility. There was just push back against what the community actually wanted, yes. Can I thank the two of you for all the work that you did, not only during the floods but the work that you do all the time and the assistance that you have given this community with the power bonuses – and given to me, too. Thank you.

Jan PHILLIPS: Well, everybody was entitled to it.

The CHAIR: We are going to move on. Ms Tyrrell, a question from you.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: No, actually. I have got enough information so far –

The CHAIR: Are you all right? Okay, Dr Ratnam.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: unless you have something to contribute.

The CHAIR: No, we will move on. Dr Ratnam.

Samantha RATNAM: Firstly, Jan and Jacqui, thank you very much for an excellent oral submission. That was really, really powerful and it was really important for us to hear directly from your experience and about all the incredible work you are doing in the community. I had a couple of questions. One: we heard this morning, and I think it was from Greater Shepparton council – which I forgot to ask about, but you might know about this – is there a vulnerable person’s register? It was referenced before. Do you all have knowledge of it, given that you all probably interact with a lot of the kind of vulnerable cohorts in our community?

Jan PHILLIPS: I can tell you that I actually was asked – I do not know if I am supposed to say this – to help them with their census so that we could have some understanding of how many. I was not able to do it, but there is no register. We just know who they are.

Samantha RATNAM: You know who they are.

Jan PHILLIPS: They are my people.

Jacqui KISS: But we do not know them all; we cannot.

Jan PHILLIPS: And we find them every day.

Samantha RATNAM: Yes, so it might be something that is coming through from a couple of the hearings in terms of: how do we account for the people who would need greater support but might be more isolated in the circumstances?

Jan PHILLIPS: Well, that is another example of what we have been able to do and how we have been able to change our process and model it on our neighbourhood houses. Unfortunately one of the local churches that was doing food security prior to the floods closed. We have taken that role on. I have had some funding from one of the local funding sources, but it has ended. It was only supposed to be for winter, but our clientele has probably quadrupled in that time, and I do not know how we are going to afford to continue do it. I have got a million questions like that, not that I think it is for this inquiry.

Jacqui KISS: I think the thing, too, is people became vulnerable who would not be on the register –

Samantha RATNAM: That is right, so then there is something to account for that.

Jacqui KISS: because they were home alone that night or their husband went away, or you know, there was a bunch of things that created vulnerability for people who would not be identified on a register.

Samantha RATNAM: Okay, so there is a piece of work for us to think about and think about how we explore that through this inquiry. The second question I had was – you have kind of touched on this, but I would love to know from your perspective in terms of where people are at now in terms of recovery – what is your sense of where people are at? What are the biggest needs people are still coming to you for?

Jacqui KISS: Knowledge.

Samantha RATNAM: Housing material?

Jan PHILLIPS: Understanding.

Jacqui KISS: Financial.

Jan PHILLIPS: Financial, yes. Everything that you could imagine is still going on now.

Jacqui KISS: We are still picking up people – a week ago – who were out of their houses and had been since the flood. An elderly gentleman had not been allocated a case manager because he did not know how to get one, and the people he went to in the community did not know how to get one, so he ended up with us.

Samantha RATNAM: Okay. That is a year later.

Jacqui KISS: And he was significantly affected, and that is now – that is last week.

Samantha RATNAM: It is a year later.

Jacqui KISS: Yes.

Samantha RATNAM: Okay. Do you all have a sense of how many people are still out of home or not able to go back into their home, in temporary accommodation?

Jacqui KISS: Out of the ones who were out of their homes?

Samantha RATNAM: Yes.

Jacqui KISS: I would predict probably 70 per cent are not back.

Samantha RATNAM: Seventy per cent are not back.

Jan PHILLIPS: And I think Jac is being generous with that figure.

Samantha RATNAM: Okay. We have asked the council if they have got an assessment of how many people that it actually is, but that is interesting to know as well in terms of how many people have not returned. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Ms Broad.

Gaelle BROAD: Thank you both. It has been very, very helpful hearing your stories. I guess you talk about who is in charge and where to get information. I am interested in that. I guess when you look at the constitution, emergency response is kind of more a state government responsibility, but local knowledge and the council's input have certainly been significant in this area. Just in terms of in future, how would you like to receive information in order to get it out into the community, or what could be done now in between events?

Jan PHILLIPS: During our hard lockdown with COVID a local group called the Lighthouse, a fantastic organisation, started a thing called GV Cares, which is a WhatsApp for volunteers. It was pretty significant. They were able to actually send out information in one area. People opted to be on that WhatsApp. They could ask for volunteers. They asked for people to go doorknocking on the Friday as the floods were arriving. I think that that is important, but it probably needs to be with a more central group – with council. That would be my opinion.

Jacqui KISS: I think too the State Emergency Service we were told was the contact point, as per the constitution. Our State Emergency Services were quite small and locally were busy preparing their own homes but prioritising the community's homes as well. So people would call people they knew in the SES because they could not get through on the main numbers. So perhaps having, then, the designated services is not necessarily going to always work when people are panicked.

Jan PHILLIPS: I think it needs to be multifaceted too. We took on the role of information for our community, but there are other centres, like there was the McIntosh Centre in Shepparton. Whether it will be the McIntosh Centre or the Ballantyne Centre, it is a place where people can actually go and maybe have an information officer standing there recording 'We will get back to you if we don't know the answers' or 'Yes, this is what's happening,' because it is a flood for the one spot, the one phone number, so to be able to disseminate that information to different areas so that they could help but also have your social medias – your WhatsApp, your Facebooks – and your local TV and radio, and hopefully all that information gets out.

Gaelle BROAD: And just in the service you guys provide, is there any additional support that has been given to you to help I guess gear up for such a huge demand on your resources?

Jan PHILLIPS: We got some funding through Neighbourhood Houses Victoria initially, so I was able to provide some extra resources. Council have been really great. They have advocated for us, and we have been able to apply to them for some funding. But it is, you know, \$1000 here and \$10,000 there. I do not know the long-term sustainability of that. That is why it is a nervous position to be in when you are the manager of a place that is actually still working just as hard.

Gaelle BROAD: And just on that, you mentioned –

The CHAIR: Last question and then we have to move on, Gaelle.

Gaelle BROAD: Sorry, yes, thank you. Because you are working just as hard, and you said it is almost as bad as it was then, what are you sort of focused on now, or how could you be supported? What support are you looking for or need at this point?

Jan PHILLIPS: It is basically financial support to our community. That is their big ask economically.

Jacqui KISS: I think Dr Samantha Ratnam said to me – or was it you, Rikkie-Lee – 'You look tired.' In the month after the floods, we functioned on adrenaline. The adrenaline is gone, so we need support to continue our roles within the community.

The CHAIR: Great. Ms Bath.

Melina BATH: Thanks, Chair. Thank you very much. Thank you for having very big hearts and very broad shoulders and huge spirit, as has our local member Kim O'Keeffe, who is sitting in the audience.

The CHAIR: A lot of shout-outs.

Melina BATH: But separate to that you do have to personally look after yourselves. There is a sense of tiredness, there is a sense of exhaustion for carrying those people on your shoulders, so thank you – but look after yourselves. I have written 'bureaucracy bingo'. These are the one-liners. 'Bureaucracy bingo just hits.' 'Who's in charge?' 'House of Hugs.' First of all, my question is: we have just had on 31 July the cancellation of those flood grants, financial grants. Is the recommendation to us to start them up again or continue them?

Jan PHILLIPS: Continue them.

Jacqui KISS: Continue them.

Melina BATH: Thank you. That is all right. I just wanted to get that on record, recommendation 1.

The CHAIR: For how long? Or should it continue? What does that look like? I just think that might help. What does it look like? When you say 'continue' –

Jan PHILLIPS: How long is a piece of string?

The CHAIR: Well, you tell us.

Jacqui KISS: A couple of years.

The CHAIR: A couple of years?

Jan PHILLIPS: Yes.

Jacqui KISS: Yes.

Wendy LOVELL: Anglicare say three years.

Melina BATH: Yes, okay. Thank you. It is important we get that on the record. I have looked up Emergency Management Victoria and the state emergency management plan – this is on their website. Two hundred people I think are based in Melbourne or surrounds. We say, ‘Who’s in charge?’ It talks about this plan: mitigation, response, relief, recovery. It goes to, and I will not read it all because it is a huge document:

Relief is the provision of assistance to meet the essential needs of individuals, families and communities during and in the immediate aftermath of an emergency.

Well, that is what we have had here. Have you had any debrief from a representative from Emergency Management Victoria in that context to put your feedback and say, ‘We need you in charge’ or anything of that nature?

Jan PHILLIPS: No. No.

Melina BATH: Would you like to have some sort of a debrief?

Jan PHILLIPS: I think that that could –

Jacqui KISS: We did talk to them. We have a representative who visited every day post floods when we were running the relief centre, when they could get over here. But a debrief now to sort of say, ‘What can we do now? What do we need to keep going?’, and to talk to them about who becomes the central agency and disseminates information, that kind of thing, would be good.

Jan PHILLIPS: Yes.

Melina BATH: Thank you. I am cognisant, just reflecting on fire situations, in the CFA they call it a chain of command. It just feels like it has not been evident from your perspective here.

Jan PHILLIPS: Yes, we did not see it. So for us, it did not exist.

Melina BATH: You have not experienced it.

Jan PHILLIPS: And that is not saying that they were not working really hard, but for us, we did not see it. I think that is one of the things I put down here. Our truth and someone else’s truth could be different, but it does not mean that we are right and they are wrong; it is just that we can only speak on our own experience.

Melina BATH: But you were at the face of it. Thank you. And mental health triage personnel: help me – did you say someone was here for a week? I want to understand that. Clearly, with the greatest respect, you need that support to disseminate that in your community. What would you like to see?

Jacqui KISS: They were here the day I opened the centre, and they provided support for the community and debriefing for our volunteers. We had some large group debriefing.

Melina BATH: Who were they, sorry?

Jacqui KISS: This was APMHA.

Melina BATH: APMHA, right.

The CHAIR: Who is that? Sorry, I do not know who it is.

Jacqui KISS: They changed their name quite recently.

Melina BATH: Are they federal, state – what do you think?

Jacqui KISS: It was started as a local organisation about 20 years ago and is now state.

Melina BATH: Okay.

The CHAIR: APMHA?

Jacqui KISS: A-P-M-H-A.

Melina BATH: Would you like that to have continued?

Jacqui KISS: Yes.

Melina BATH: Is it something that had value for you?

Jacqui KISS: Yes.

Jan PHILLIPS: The problem we found was that when they were only getting one or two people coming in, they would say –

Melina BATH: ‘Not worth our while.’

Jan PHILLIPS: And it was not just that, it was also the state government guys sitting with us too. And look, I get it, there has to be an end day, but it is just that I do not know how you can decide that that one person you might get in next week has the greatest need out of everybody that you have seen. I do not know how you can kind of –

Jacqui KISS: I reckon the way to do it is to provide some financial support for us to be a contact point and for Jan and me, as a community house, to know who we can then contact.

Melina BATH: Refer?

Jacqui KISS: Yes, so we know who we can refer on to.

Melina BATH: And have that as a repository of care, we will say, for mental health so that you can then refer them on. So they are not waiting in the front office, but they are a source there when you need.

Jacqui KISS: Yes.

Jan PHILLIPS: Yes. That can be risky in itself too, because if we cannot find it, they are never going to, and there lies another problem.

Melina BATH: Thank you very much.

Jan PHILLIPS: That is okay.

The CHAIR: Actually, just on that, the local hospital is not a referral point for critical, crisis mental health or – no?

Jacqui KISS: They are swamped – not responsive.

The CHAIR: Okay. That is not the question, though. Is it a referral point?

Jan PHILLIPS: They are like every public health service. They are absolutely swamped. Put a disaster in there, and I do not believe that they are equipped to be able to – they will work really hard and diligently to provide the best services that they can. I know in our mental health service the employees are working in a way where they case-manage 35 people – they have got 350 or 3000.

Melina BATH: You need a responsive team to come in.

Jan PHILLIPS: Yes, and that is normal day to day, so put in a disaster and they are struggling to meet that need – like all of us.

The CHAIR: Yes. Thank you so much for coming and giving us your evidence today. It was really a very detailed and interesting presentation. You have given us a lot of insights to work with. Thank you both for coming in.

Witnesses withdrew.