

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2022 Flood Event in Victoria

Melbourne – Thursday 12 October 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

WITNESS

Madeleine Serle, Chair, Maribyrnong Community Recovery Committee.

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 paying 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.

As you are giving evidence today, all evidence 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 the 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 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 to introduce myself, and committee members will also introduce themselves to you. I am Sonja Terpstra. I am the Chair of the Environment and Planning Committee. I am also a Member for North-Eastern Metropolitan Region.

David ETTERS HANK: Hi. David Ettershank, Deputy Chair, Western Metropolitan Region.

Melina BATH: Good afternoon. Melina Bath, Eastern Victoria.

Samantha RATNAM: Afternoon. Samantha Ratnam, Northern Metropolitan Region.

Gaëlle BROAD: Hello. Gaëlle Broad, Member for Northern Victoria.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Hi. I am Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, Member for Northern Victoria.

Wendy LOVELL: Wendy Lovell, Member for Northern Victoria.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Ryan Batchelor, Member for the Southern Metropolitan Region.

The CHAIR: Great, and with that we will ask you to make your opening remarks – I believe you have got about 10 minutes – and then each of us will have an opportunity to ask you questions. So over to you. Thank you.

Madeleine SERLE: First of all, thank you. This is a privilege, to present the views of the Maribyrnong community in my capacity as the Chair of the Maribyrnong recovery committee.

We see three things in relation to where we are now, but we see ourselves starting with the proposition that the Maribyrnong floods were the largest single disaster in metropolitan Melbourne in the last 50 years and it is basically unstudied. There has been a studious decision by Emergency Management Victoria to not investigate what happened. I have listened extensively yesterday and today. I keep hearing about data, the excellence of continuous improvement and informed decision-making. There is absolutely none of that in relation to Maribyrnong. I challenge every single one of you to look to what the officials have said about what they did and what they have done since. It is quite shocking. Frankly, a serious car accident has had more review than the Maribyrnong floods – 1500 people, over 600 houses, about 80 condemned, and at this point in time we are

at about 50 per cent occupancy. The remaining 50 per cent, like me, are basically camping in unrestored homes as we negotiate insurance and delays and whatever.

It is a distressed suburb. The psychosocial harm and the costs of all of that are profound. But we are hiding in plain sight. We are 8 kilometres from the city. We are on the wrong side of the city. If we were Hawthorn, Elwood, Prahran or Malvern, this could not, would not have happened – it simply could not. So we need a solution.

I have listened extensively to all of the ideas, and the reports I have read extensively. All I can say is my position now is: what an extremely good opportunity we have to use Maribyrnong – and I defer to the other sites as well, but I can only speak of Maribyrnong – to develop a really effective disaster management resilience overview. We do not have it in Australia, and we are going to have to get better because our disasters are coming thicker and faster. It is horrible, and we cannot afford that. Our local federal member Dr Mulino presented evidence to us when I invited him to my committee: we spend 97 per cent on recovery and about 3 per cent on prevention. Well, we cannot afford to do that; that is just insane.

From the committee's point of view, we take three areas. I call it 'Home safe and dry', and then I talk about better emergency management, and then I talk about mitigation. So they are immediate human needs, they are long-term living and they are future safety for a sustainable, prosperous, resilient community.

In relation to 'Home safe and dry' I must say thank you to the social agencies and to corporate social responsibility in action – Anglicare, Cohealth, Emergencies Ministry and GenWest. I say thank you to John Berrill for insurance law. I say thank you to Southern Cross Protection for nightly patrols to manage the looting we were experiencing. I say thank you, believe it or not, to a bank, Comm Bank, who was instituting, with the initiative of Michael Hartnett of Anglicare, a rewards program to put prosperity back into the community, and I call on the other banks to step up and answer Michael's calls.

In relation to emergency management – well, look, it is very hard to know where to start, because there has not been emergency management. We have had zero anything in so many ways. It is hard to believe it has been as bad as it has, and again I request that Minister Symes direct EMV to conduct the all-agency review. We do not know what happened. You cannot make and you cannot spend money on decisions if you do not have foundational data. We do not have it.

To give you an absolute human perspective on this, right now our volunteers in the Footscray SES – and thank you, thank you, thank you – have had no flood training since 14 October last year, none. They have none scheduled on the calendar for training whatsoever – none. That means two things. The first thing it means is that EMV and the SES have left volunteers at risk. We are, as a society, letting them put their lives at risk without training or preparation or the opportunity to know they are going out safely. Then on the other side of that, for myself as a resident, I have no reasonable basis to think that the next time it happens – and it will happen, it is just a question of when – it will be any different from the bin fire it was last time. We simply cannot conduct ourselves as a civil society with that degree of inadequate preparation and management. It is inconceivable.

Mr Batchelor, I listened to your thoughts in particular on community flood preparedness. I endorse Dr Bendrups's work and her social commitment to this space. As part of my interaction with Dr Bendrups I am becoming a reverse-engineered flood expert. It is not what I expected to be, but here I am. I have come across another extraordinary man, John Guegan. We have found an old system, and you have brought it up, and it is the marvellous flood maps. That was created in the mid-twos, and we will bring it back. We will drive it back. I am going to put it into our recovery plan, and it will be a whole-of-community response. It will be the country comes to the city, so that I know when the warnings come that Rosina across the road will not have a text, will not have an email, and she is going to rely on connectedness. We will do that. We will be able to do that, so that we will know. We will get that going. That is community. But it is going to rely on the SES, Melbourne Water, EMV to get the right data, to input it, so that we can swing into action and be ready. So we will have done the workshops. We will know what to do. We will be prepared as much as we can, but if they do not tell us in time, we will not be able to do it.

It is interesting, you know, listening in particular to Dr Di Lorenzo in relation to the handover to the BOM. All I can say about the excellence of that prospect: every day since 3 October – just recently those flood events, those

poor people – I have had a ping from the BOM telling me either a flood watch or a flood warning, on 3rd of October, the 4th of October, the 5th, the 6th, the 7th, the 8th, the 9th, the 10th to Maribymong. That is on the app – ping. When I open it up and go through it, it is wrong – it is absolutely wrong. It is just being cross-correlated. The data is wrong; it is a misrepresentation. I am aware of a community that is going to be seeing these things and just going through a phase of stress and then disinterest. It is not going to work. So any suggestion of that – I think Melbourne Water and the BOM, who apparently have got a great relationship, no. They are getting it all wrong. And may I say, I take umbrage at their disrespect for the work of Geoff and Ron. They are diligent public servants who have spent a whole life contributing. The idea that they are universally wrong is untenable. They are not silly old duffers. They know their work, and I commend their work, and I ask you to look very carefully at how they challenge Melbourne Water's rating tables in particular to Darraweit Guim. It is really important.

Moving forward to mitigation, the issue is cost apparently. I am not an accountant, but I can tell you the actual costs versus the intangible costs are extraordinary – absolutely extraordinary. If you did full cost accounting modelling, you would be gobsmacked. If you wreck 600 houses with a value on average of, say, \$700,000, and if you have to fix them with shortfalls and escalating costs, you are moving very fast towards \$250 million, and that is not as fast as Black Caviar coming down the straight.

One thing – and I talk to the horse community, from your background, Ms Lovell – that struck me the other day was that I know I am at risk, as my community is, in relation to not dealing with mitigation. We say we need a whole-of-catchment approach. We need smart work. We need smart brains. As part of the committee, we developed a briefing note to Dr Mulino on our expectations, that he support an application that we will initiate, drive and get support from council and ERV as to a new study. We will do it out of the national disaster fund, and we will work out what is a good idea, what works. Is it Arundel? Is it something completely different? I am quite sure it will be a mix of things. It will be slowing the water down in a really smart way. It will take account of all of the issues that Melbourne Water say will block it again. I have already started stakeholder engagement: I am talking to the environmentalists and the river custodians of our beautiful Murring-gnay-bir-nong. I look forward to meeting with Uncle Dave, who is the Indigenous custodian of the river. We believe that like all problems that are complex we can work our way through. We will not all agree, but we will definitely be able to get to a situation that is a lot better than 14 October.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Madeleine. The clock has beaten us there, so thank you for those opening remarks. I will start with questions, so you will have plenty of us having plenty of questions for you. I just want to start with: you are the chair of the Maribymong Community Recovery Committee. It is a community-led one that was endorsed by the council. It was to support recovery efforts following the flooding of the river. Can you talk me through your work and your role as chair? How are recovery efforts going, and what particular things? I mean, you have touched on some of the things that the committee is doing. I was just reading your paper about some of the work you are doing with Mr Mulino, who is your federal member. Can you talk us through some of the recovery work and what is happening? Also, whether it is mental health support or financial support, those sorts of things – could you talk us through that?

Madeleine SERLE: Sure. With my committee we initiated as fast as we could. Having said that, we only started in May; we are brand new. We are running really fast trying to catch up. We were started too late, and that will be a point I will make in the recovery plan. We have done really simple things. I have just got council to agree to create an annual free membership – I call it R2R – of our aquatic centre so that every flood-affected resident in Maribymong can use all those facilities for their fitness and their wellbeing; I think it is going to make a difference. We have created what I call a help hub. I established a room at our local library so residents can come and talk to Cohealth or they can talk to Anglicare, to just have a face to face. E-recovery does not work. Sitting on a phone, tappity tap, does not work. We have got a vulnerable community. We have got English as a second language. I now have the benefit of GenWest's work, and I have access to a Vietnamese translator for all of the documents we are going to be doing. I have already got them to work, and they did a beautiful job for my first CRC newsletter, which went out yesterday. So we are trying really hard. But I can say categorically that the degree of distress and exhaustion is profound. I would not have believed it possible.

The CHAIR: That is often what happens when you have a traumatic event – there is a long tail often.

Madeleine SERLE: Very long.

The CHAIR: People have different ways: some people bounce back quite easily, others do not. It is also about accessing the help they need when they need it, and sometimes that can be immediate, sometimes that can be later. Do you think your committee is making progress for people in that space? I mean, obviously there is more work to do. And will your committee continue on, or is there a finite life for your committee?

Madeleine SERLE: Thank you. We were set up for 18 months. I have already identified with ERV and the resources of CRCs that we are going to need to take an extension of at least 12 months. That just seems feasible. Are we getting sufficient support? I would always encourage our local government and the members who are the council reps on our particular council to be more forthcoming and more transparent in relation to the disaster funding and to appreciate it is not council-led recovery, it is community-led recovery. But that is tough – we appreciate that tension.

The CHAIR: I do not know whether you heard Colin's and Stan's earlier contributions. You might actually like to meet one another afterwards, if you could. I am sure they would like some support there.

Madeleine SERLE: Thank you, but I have known Stan and Colin since about two weeks after the flood, because I went out and said, 'I need to talk to –

The CHAIR: Excellent. It is good to hear that they were able to contact you, because we want to make sure they have got support. I have got about 30 seconds on my clock, so I might pass to you, Mr Ettershank, for a question, please.

David ETTERS HANK: Thank you. Thank you for your presentation today. I do not know if you heard the testimony of Mr Wiebusch from the SES this morning. Were you watching that by any chance?

Madeleine SERLE: I was.

David ETTERS HANK: I guess for a lot of the committee members there is a bit of a jarring disconnect between what we are hearing from different people. I am just wondering what your immediate reaction would be to a fairly strong suggestion from him that the rollout of SES services at Maribyrnong went pretty well, and at least for the first 150 houses there was a good follow-up. Can I get your initial thoughts on that?

Madeleine SERLE: I would sack him. I would absolutely sack him. I see absolutely no delivery, performance or follow-through. I appreciate people make mistakes – I make them – but what I do not appreciate is the lack of action and initiative since then. I have already spoken about the state of the SES volunteers who are sitting over there in peril when we flood again. So no – three houses, the Anglers Tavern, and the failure to conduct the all-agency multi review. I mean, why won't you do that? It is the reaction, perhaps – yes, they got it wrong, but they were relying on data possibly that was flawed, as we have all listened to. But no, if he was in my organisation, he would not be in my organisation.

David ETTERS HANK: Okay. All right. We have got a very short time, so please forgive my flipping around a little bit here. There is obviously a long history around Arundel, and it would be pretty bold to put a bet on it ever being built. That said –

Madeleine SERLE: Well, I think I have actually got a good reason to bet, if Ms Lovell had asked me about it.

David ETTERS HANK: Can I just ask: in terms of the residents in situ in Maribyrnong township, what is the attitude to mandatory buyback of properties by the state government?

Madeleine SERLE: It has not been discussed, frankly.

David ETTERS HANK: I am just trying to –

Madeleine SERLE: No, it has not been discussed. But having said that, if you look to my submission, I make a point in relation to the first statutory decision that was made by Melbourne Water and the local council. They put a condition in which established an indemnity in favour of Melbourne Water to waive all rights in relation to flood damage to property and contents. So their first decision was to make a resident unable to insure their property, because they had already waived their rights, and to make it impossible for them, probably, to refinance their home, because you cannot obtain a mortgage if you have not got house insurance. That

condition is put through a section 173 deed. It sits on the title. It runs with the property. The next person will get it. It is basically a starvation. So their decision was to basically kill off the rights of the residents in February. That is when it came about. And the only reason I know about it is a complete fluke, because it is on my boundary and I was worried about my trees, so I got notification of it. That was the first thing they did.

So I see a really naive approach to resilience. We have been living in Maribyrnong for well over 100 years. Yes, we live on a flood plain, but so does most of Melbourne. Do we need to be more resilient? Absolutely. Should we be able to build better? Yes. Does the social contract say, 'Let's give someone help to go to the first level'? Absolutely. That would be money well spent, no doubt about it – happy to do that. Should some houses not be restored? Absolutely. Give the person the chance to do that. Again, 97 per cent on recovery, 3 per cent on prevention – that money has got to go the other way around.

The CHAIR: I am sorry. The clock has beaten us, unfortunately. Ms Lovell with a question.

Wendy LOVELL: Thank you. I will get to Arundel as my second question, but first of all I would like to ask you about the rating tables at Darraweit Guim. I am very familiar with the work of Geoff Crapper and Ron, and I have known Geoff for a long time. One of the reasons that the management of the floods worked better in Shepparton was because of a great document that Geoff actually put together. He knows what he is talking about.

Madeleine SERLE: He does.

Wendy LOVELL: So I was just wondering if you can tell us about those rating tables at Darraweit Guim and why Melbourne Water have discounted them and what difference they might have made in your community if you had had that knowledge.

Madeleine SERLE: Well, I do not have standing on technicals, although I am building my expertise. But I will say that – from my understanding from Geoff's work – there is an inherent error, a calibration error, that means it is consistently reporting a faulty data point.

Wendy LOVELL: Not with Geoff's work – with Melbourne Water's work?

Madeleine SERLE: Melbourne Water's work – so Geoff has identified that. In what we call the first ping halfway through this year when we actually got a flood watch for Maribyrnong, he was able to go back to his own work, do some checking and say, 'Steady, everybody. It's okay.' So, yes, again, I ask you to go back to the technicals and cross-reference, but the idea that Melbourne Water is the expert and got it all right and Ron Sutherland and Geoff Crapper got it all wrong is quite ludicrous. Because Melbourne Water has demonstrated to everybody in Maribyrnong – Moonee Valley, Rivervue – that they were wrong. They should have done a better job. They just do not know what they manage in relation to our river system.

Wendy LOVELL: Okay. I will ask you about that and Arundel together. In the management of the river system in regional Victoria we have water authorities that are responsible for the delivery of water. We have catchment managements that are responsible for the management of the catchment. Melbourne Water is unique in that they are both agencies. Do you think that they should be separated, those two roles?

Madeleine SERLE: Yes.

Wendy LOVELL: And how do you believe Arundel would have helped in Maribyrnong?

Madeleine SERLE: Yes, they should be separated, because there is an inherent conflict of interest. And frankly, we have been seeing over the last 12 months a display of a lack of independence and management of conflict. Would Arundel work? I do not know. I know that it was very fine scholarship that got to the point of Ron's work. Do we need to go back and look at it? Yes. Because we are going to write a cheque for \$250 million, maybe. Having said that, we can do that – I have no doubt. Is it the right solution, or is it a combination of solutions? Do we need retarding swales all the way down, better stormwater, or to be not letting water run off properties from any developments – all of that? I do not need to tell the country people in this room that water is gold. We should not be wasting it. I also know now from yesterday and listening to the VRC that the wall worked but it is not going to work necessarily going forward, because climate change is going to make worse floods. They came very close to having to push back a really big carnival because of the amount of

damage and the water going through, so I am saying my problem is their problem. We have got \$1 billion on the line with the VRC, with their wall not being necessarily good enough, so they need mitigation upstream as much as I do. So I tell you what: the CRC is going to be having a chat to the VRC really fast to say we need to be lobbying together. We are aligned.

Wendy LOVELL: Thank you.

The CHAIR: You have got 5 seconds.

Wendy LOVELL: That is fine.

The CHAIR: Okay. Mr Batchelor, with a question, please.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Ms Serle. I agree we are all becoming armchair hydrologists over the course of this inquiry. I want to go back to your comments about the conversation I had with Dr Bendrups and the sort of usefulness of having some pretty useful hyperlocalised information. We heard some, I thought, really interesting evidence earlier today about some analogous works undertaken up in Rochester, where every house, it seems, has a plan, has some detailed mapping, and that might have existed in Maribyrnong a decade ago possibly. Have you had any conversations with the Maribyrnong City Council about their willingness to lead that work going forwards?

Madeleine SERLE: It is on the radar, I should say. I am not encouraged by their approach and their proactivity in terms of trying to manage this. They are taking a very defensive posture, and we are working on our relationship. Having said that, I am now aware of that work through a local – an absolute community champion, John Guegan, who brought it to my attention – and that connected me with Dr Bendrups. We will do that – we absolutely will do that. Every house will know what flood levels will impact on their own homes, and we will do training. It will be like bushfires. The season will be upon us. We will know what to do, and we will see how we go. It will be hyperlocalised, you are quite right.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Do you expect that the City of Maribyrnong will be supportive of that work, based on your engagement with them? It is an open question.

Madeleine SERLE: I think I can say on behalf of the community that we will lobby successfully to achieve that.

Ryan BATCHELOR: I have no doubt of your determination. I have asked a series of questions about getting communities to understand what concepts like ‘one in 100 years’ mean, and sometimes it is quite difficult translating conceptual and technical descriptions of risk to people in their everyday lives and sometimes practical things like a piece of laminated information showing levels on a house are a much more powerful way of communicating this to them. I will just make a gratuitous comment: I think sometimes that having a laminated piece of paper or a sign on the back of the door or something on the fridge is worth half a dozen apps in terms of its visualisation for people and their ability to understand.

I am interested in, related, the concern you have got about the multiple warnings coming at you from the Bureau of Meteorology or from the SES and their coming up with false positives, really. What effect does that have on the community?

Madeleine SERLE: Disturbing. The first ping halfway through the year was horrible. We had a whole night of anxious people just walking around trying to – and we had a completely overblown, mismanaged response by the council. Moonee Valley did it much better, and I commend Mayor Tyson for the way they prepared into it. We are just not doing things very well.

Ryan BATCHELOR: How do you think those agencies get the balance right?

Madeleine SERLE: By doing their jobs. This is simple process. This is research, recording, technology, talking, multi-agency review, looking at what happened, looking at what did not happen. It is coordination. It is doing what we are doing, sitting around a table talking and thinking, and they are not doing that. They are siloing.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Has SES spoken with you since the floods?

Madeleine SERLE: No. And I was interested to hear Mr Wiebusch say that he had spoken to the CEO of Maribyrnong council, and that will be one of the first questions I put into the next agenda.

The CHAIR: I am sorry, but the clock has beaten us. Dr Ratnam with a question, please.

Samantha RATNAM: Thank you so much, Ms Serle, for appearing today, your really thorough written submission and your really excellent verbal submission today as well. It has made us make sense of a whole bunch of things that we have been hearing over a couple of months now. I wanted to particularly follow up on the issue you raised about the new permit conditions and the indemnification that Melbourne Water is seeking. It is quite extraordinary. Have you pursued that at all with Maribyrnong City Council to ask them about the process by which they have been able to apply these new permit conditions? Are they going alongside permits made under delegation or subject to council approval, although they are a smaller amount? Do you have any sense of what is happening there?

Madeleine SERLE: No, I do not. That one exists. If it becomes a precedent, it is a chilling effect for everyone else. It just simply is not a way to establish a resilient community. In fact it is deliberately creating harm, which is completely contradictory to the statutory obligations of Melbourne Water. It is just statutory overreach. Have I raised it with the council? No. But I have consistently given the planning director of Maribyrnong council, who sits on the committee, the opportunity to raise and discuss planning permitting ever since the flood, and I have not yet had that revealed. I had to wait until this inquiry to put it out.

Samantha RATNAM: Well, thank you very much for raising that with us. If you have any further information – for example, about that planning permit – so we could follow it up to understand whether it was made under delegation, the process by which this requirement was asked, because in terms of issuing planning permit conditions, they are generally within the remit of councils to decide – for example, a section 173.

Madeleine SERLE: It is a totally decided thing, and if you look at the document I provide in my submission, you can see it is just dropped in slightly to the left, so it had to have been popped in after the flood – quite bizarre.

Samantha RATNAM: Yes, which means that it is an active decision and it is worth pursuing the decision-making around that, because you are right in terms of what it could mean for future decisions and other councils. It is something that we should be really alert to, because it does have huge implications for residents and property.

Another question about warning systems: if Melbourne Water had been able to predict the size of the flood accurately and to do it earlier, do you think the current warning systems would have been enough?

Madeleine SERLE: No, absolutely not.

Samantha RATNAM: They still would have been inadequate?

Madeleine SERLE: No, because the community are not all sitting on their iPhones. It is as simple as that – they are not. We need a tailored audience, and again, I still say, the country and the city, we need to be talking to each other, knowing where people are and checking on them with enough time, provided that we all know and have a basic system, like a bushfire plan or like a flood plan – modernised, brought back.

Samantha RATNAM: Thank you. And are you hearing much from community members and the like that you have connections with about their ability to get insurance going forward and the implications for insurance post the event?

Madeleine SERLE: Well, naturally, some are being offered extraordinary amounts of increases, yes, so it is very difficult. It is really difficult, but we absolutely need to be able to insure all of our properties for a resilient Australia. It took me months to get the Insurance Council of Australia to come down to do an insurance consultation. They are actually required to do so under their code of conduct, and for reasons that are obscure, they did not do it. But we have had one. I am very grateful for it, and I have now formally requested another one to get people to be face to face with their insurers to understand their rights and work out future steps. One point about the insurers, though, is that you are not allowed to rebuild with resilience under current models.

Samantha RATNAM: Yes, that is right. We will look at that.

The CHAIR: Twenty seconds.

Samantha RATNAM: That is fine. I will leave it there, thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks. Helps to get us back on track. Ms Bath with a question, please.

Melina BATH: Thank you very much. Thank you. I think you have got very broad shoulders, Madeleine, and I am sure they are quite weighted. And thank you for your work on the community recovery committee. A recommendation for us is that all of those that ask for it need to continue on for at least another 12 months to two years?

Madeleine SERLE: Yes.

Melina BATH: At a minimum?

Madeleine SERLE: Yes.

Melina BATH: Thank you. I am just now going –

Madeleine SERLE: I would love it to be less, but it is unrealistic.

Melina BATH: Where people need it, and we heard about that in Seymour and others as well. Also, in relation to that, you just said, ‘We can make this happen.’ I asked Faye the other day about that, and I know that a similar thing existed 10 or 15 years ago in Latrobe Valley for Traralgon. But who is going to fund that? Because it cannot be Madeleine and her small team. Tell us, because we are going to make recommendations: what do you want to be the recommendation about that sort of support? And it is not just for your area.

Madeleine SERLE: No, it is universal.

Melina BATH: It is for all of those flood-affected or flood-potential areas. So what do you want to say about that?

Madeleine SERLE: I am sure there is budgetary allocation that has not been well allocated to this sort of thing – 97, 3 per cent. I do think the national disaster fund will have prospects for better coordination across Australia for resilience. I am sure there is recourse there. And I do think it is actually going to be able to be achievable by people doing the things they are supposed to do. If you look at Melbourne Water’s panel recommendations, all of those 15, except in mitigation, reflect doing certain things that are going to enable us to extract the data to put those things back together again. It is not rocket science.

Melina BATH: And I asked Maribyrnong shire – ‘shire’ – council –

Madeleine SERLE: You are a country girl.

Melina BATH: I am a country girl – about the multiagency review, and the lady at the end said that they had requested it, and then my time ended and I asked, ‘What about that?’ and she said it was denied by SES. Now, this is no fun doing a tit for tat for SES, but what we want is for good ideas and issues to be aired and the best for our constituents and our communities to move forward. Can you understand or can you share why you think there is this total resistance to a fair and transparent analysis?

Madeleine SERLE: If you have nothing to hide, you will always be open and explain what is going on. If you have something to hide, you do not want to tell. Whether that is because you have nothing to tell because you did not do something or because you did something and you did it wrong, I do not know. From my perspective, I am not interested in blame –

Melina BATH: Blame – thank you.

Madeleine SERLE: I want accountability.

Melina BATH: And that is something that a brave both government and department should be ready to stand up for in my opinion. My office is in Traralgon, and I have just got an SMS from the VicEmergency app on floods. I opened it. It was an eastern Victoria alert. I opened it, and it was a minor flood level for Latrobe

Valley. I clicked on the next round of more information, and it sent me to the Goulburn River and Lake Eildon, to Seymour, not to my area. So it is not fixed yet. Have you had that experience?

Madeleine SERLE: I can show you screenshots from the 3rd until the 10th. I did not have one yesterday. I have not got one today, but the day is still going, so they could issue one later today. I do not know. It is ridiculous. How can anybody – and I know for sure that these things will have cost millions and millions of dollars. No, it is not good enough.

Melina BATH: I have many questions but no time. Thanks very much, Madeleine.

The CHAIR: Ms Tyrrell with a question, please.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Thank you. What major hurdles have you noticed your community facing since the flood events?

Madeleine SERLE: Access to services, bureaucratic porridge – I have two situations. I have one in relation to school grants. We had about 300 children in the area. There was a school grant issued by the Department of Education for \$1200. It was not means tested – it did not matter what sort of school you went to – and had no expiry date. It did actually expire. No-one was told. The two schools were not told. I have spent months, and I am still working with the Department of Education to try and get all of the children who missed out. When I started looking, I could only find two children who actually got it – two. So I look forward in the next week or so to reaching out to the new education minister to see if he can have a fresh look and get it for these children. Punishing children – no.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Are there any other hurdles?

Madeleine SERLE: I think language. Our strongest ESL group is the Vietnamese community. We have got about 300 family groups, and working through them and trying to get them away from the idea that it is wrong to ask for help, to understand that you are not a failure because you are reaching into the social contract, has been really hard. They are remarkably hard working and have achieved so much as a second generation. Trying to get them connected and actually thinking that they are entitled to services and then getting them to the next step of trying to work out how to get the services – yes, that is an issue.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Just accessing services has been one of the major hurdles.

Madeleine SERLE: Yes.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Did they find the clean-up process was good – and moving back into their homes?

Madeleine SERLE: Well, it is still going.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: It is still going. That is where I am trying to get to. In the north – that is where I am from – there are still a lot of people out of homes. They are still living in caravans and whatnot. So can you please just give me an idea?

Madeleine SERLE: Well, based on our sort of working around, walking and checking, we are at about 50 per cent occupancy, and so the rest of us who are there are basically camping in unrestored homes. There is a whole group of people who just left and will never come back. They are the renters, who would basically often be single mums with children. Trying to get them help – yes, it is a shemozzle. It is really very sad.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Right, so they are finding it is an issue to try and find new housing. Has it been hard for them to get trades in? Has that been a big delay?

Madeleine SERLE: Well, it is the consistent thing of unavailability. One thing I will say, though, is that the insurance companies do not manage their appointed builders at all well. If I was a business and I saw that much waste of money and management, I would be thinking, 'Eureka! Boy, can I make more money on my bottom line.' So yes, it is a mismanaged industry, and there are so many inefficiencies that it compounds human distress.

The CHAIR: Thirty seconds.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Perfect timing, Ms Tyrrell. Thank you. Ms Broad with a question, please.

Gaelle BROAD: Thank you very much. I will just say, Madeliene, your legal background is certainly serving you well. We really appreciate your insights, and your submission is very thorough. It covers a lot. Can you just tell us a bit about the committee – what inspired it to be formed, how you work, how often you meet and who you are engaging with?

Madeleine SERLE: The CRC follows a model of community-led recovery, arising out of the royal commission into the Black Saturday bushfires, when people realised that communities lead their own recovery and it is not top down. Every disaster is different, so the CRCs that arise, as you would know from your own communities, when they do, are different. Our particular one has council representation sitting on it and eight residents. Residents are the majority. We have reworked our terms of reference to make them reflect the national disaster principles, and as I said before, we have got – in my mind – ‘Home, safe, dry’, emergency management and mitigation. So we see our role as to listen to the community, build our trust with them and move forward – and just cope on Saturday.

Gaelle BROAD: So how often do you meet or do you engage?

Madeleine SERLE: Once a month.

Gaelle BROAD: Once a month, okay. That is helpful. Do you engage with other recovery committees?

Madeleine SERLE: I do. I know Leigh Wilson, and I have had some contact with others as well. And I commend Leigh Wilson.

Gaelle BROAD: Yes, great. I am sure there are some shared learnings that would be coming across all of that.

Madeleine SERLE: There are.

Gaelle BROAD: You have talked about prevention and mitigation. You mentioned the early warnings and the need for accurate information. Resilience – your submission talks about the Queensland Reconstruction Authority and the building guidelines and materials. Do you want to expand on that?

Madeleine SERLE: Yes. Victoria needs to catch up on the other states, in particular New South Wales but especially Queensland. We are not ready for resilience. We do not build in a resilient way right now. When I want to start restoring my home, which has not even started, I cannot use resilient materials with my insurer. My builder refuses. So that is just ridiculous. We are basically building in failure. I think we need a Victorian authority comparable to the Queensland Reconstruction Authority, building in resilience. If any of you have seen all of the publications coming out of Queensland on how to design your houses and the materials you use, all of that sort of thing, again it is just picking up bushfire management. And people should also be aware that the cost of floods is far greater than the cost of fires – far greater. So as I said at the start, I just see enormous opportunities to do better.

Gaelle BROAD: For some reason we seem to be a state that is stuck in like for like when we should be building back better.

Madeleine SERLE: Yes. We are in like for like, and we will be doing it over and over.

Gaelle BROAD: That is right, certainly on a lot of levels. I am just interested too in your community engagement and what we can learn as far as recommendations go moving forward, where people go for information. At one of the Seymour hearings they talked about the benefits of flood wardens. Have you got any thoughts on that?

Madeleine SERLE: Yes, I do, and I think that goes back to the notion of the localised community wardens. There is one particular fellow in the community I have mentioned, John Guegan. He spent his whole life working on this up until about 17 days before the flood, and I will be working with him. On the day of the flood – water, water. His wife and family were trying to help. He got a phone call; his very ill son had deteriorated.

He is in his 80s. So he had to go and see his son, who is in his 50s, in St Kilda. He went across. Things were getting worse back in Maribyrnong. He had to return home. His son died that day.

Gaelle BROAD: Oh, how awful.

Madeleine SERLE: So that poor man, on the 14th, on Saturday, had the death of his son and the flood that he worked so hard to prepare a community for.

The CHAIR: I am sorry, but the clock has beaten us at a very inopportune time. But thank you very much, Madeleine, for coming in and providing your evidence. Best of luck with the ongoing recovery for your community.

Witness withdrew.