

T R A N S C R I P T

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the Supply of Homes in Regional Victoria

Ballarat – Thursday 8 May 2025

MEMBERS

Juliana Addison – Chair

Martin Cameron – Deputy Chair

Jordan Crugnale

Daniela De Martino

Wayne Farnham

Martha Haylett

David Hodgett

WITNESSES

Joanna Cuscaden, Executive Manager, Development Facilitation, and

Natalie Robertson, Director, Development and Growth, Ballarat City Council;

Lenka Thompson, Housing Officer, and

Ron Torres, Director, Development and Community, Hepburn Shire Council; and

Rebecca Stockfeld, Director, Planning and Environment, Macedon Ranges Shire Council.

The CHAIR: Welcome back to the final session of our public hearing into the supply of housing in regional Victoria. We are finishing off with an amazing panel of local government representatives. A very warm welcome to representatives from Hepburn Shire Council, the City of Ballarat and the Macedon Ranges shire. Before we begin I will run through some important formalities.

All evidence taken today will be recorded by Hansard and is protected by parliamentary privilege. This means that you can speak freely without fear of legal action in relation to the evidence that you give. However, it is important to remember that parliamentary privilege does not apply to comments made outside this hearing, even if you are restating what you said during the hearing.

You will receive a draft transcript of your evidence in the next week or so for you to check and approve. Corrected transcripts are published on the committee's website and may be quoted from in our final report. Thank you for making the time to meet with the committee today.

Formally, I am Juliana Addison, Chair of the committee and Member for Wendouree.

Martin CAMERON: Martin Cameron, Member for Morwell – so the Latrobe Valley in Gippsland.

Jordan CRUGNALE: Jordan Crugnale, Member for Bass, over in the Cardinia, Casey, Bass Coast shire area.

Martha HAYLETT: Martha Haylett, the Member for Ripon, covering the outskirts of Ballarat, Creswick, Clunes, all the way up to Wedderburn, St Arnaud, Ararat and everywhere in between.

The CHAIR: Excellent. Thank you for making yourselves available today. We are really looking forward to hearing about what the three local government areas have in common, but also the individual challenges. Our first representatives gave a big shout-out to Macedon Ranges this morning, so it is great to have you here. Rebecca, starting with you, would you mind introducing yourself and your role, please?

Rebecca STOCKFELD: Rebecca Stockfeld. I am the Director of Planning and Environment at Macedon Ranges Shire Council. I have been there about three years.

Natalie ROBERTSON: Natalie Robertson, Director, Development and Growth at the City of Ballarat, which does cover all things planning.

Joanna CUSCADEN: Joanna Cuscaden, Executive Manager of Development Facilitation, also covering all things planning.

Lenka THOMPSON: Lenka Thompson, Housing Officer from Hepburn Shire Council.

Ron TORRES: Good afternoon. I am Ron Torres from Hepburn Shire Council, the Director of Development and Community.

The CHAIR: Terrific. Well, I think we have got the right people here to have a really good, robust discussion. Deputy Chair, would you like to kick off?

Martin CAMERON: I certainly can. Thank you, everyone, for coming today. Previously we have had developers, builders and everyone in here giving us their concerns about housing in the regions. I would like to

open it up to all of you, one at a time. What are the areas of concern for you as the local LGAs and the planning departments in your areas from obviously, one, building houses, and also if we can throw it out to rentals as well, and are you being impacted by people that are rough sleeping also? Down those sorts of lines – if you would just give us a bit on that, please.

Ron TORRES: Thank you for the question and thank you – through the Chair. At Hepburn Shire Council it would appear that our housing delivery is on track. On paper our rate of housing delivery is actually higher than what the state government is expecting of us, but if you dig a little bit deeper beyond those figures, you will find that the housing being delivered does not meet the needs of our various households – our ageing community and so on. It does not meet their affordability requirements and their accessibility requirements. Part of that is something that really benefits the Hepburn shire – that is, the tourism attraction of Hepburn shire, and the housing is shaped around that. Many houses – 11 per cent of our housing stock – are dedicated to short-stay accommodation, not long-term rental for our households in need and not for those households in rental stress and that sort of thing. We are in the top five of councils with the highest proportion of short-stay accommodation, and we are projected to deliver 30 per cent of the state's revenue there. One significant advocacy point for Hepburn shire is to seek a greater proportion of that revenue to be reinvested in the shire to meet the needs of our various households. There are many other factors, but that is a key platform for us.

The CHAIR: Lenka, are you happy with that?

Lenka THOMPSON: Yes. That is one of our major focuses at the moment, just realising that short-stay rental accommodation proportion of our housing stock. I guess added to Ron's point about the rental stress that we see in our shire, it is at 37 per cent, which is above our state and national average. Even though we are meeting our housing target, that housing still is not delivering on affordability for our residents as well. In terms of the building, the construction that we see, it is very traditional. But we are also very constrained by our bushfire management overlays, so that dictates what kind of construction methods can be delivered. I know that you have been talking about modular housing, like in Daylesford, where there is that company or that kind of building development methodology available to us. As a shire we are looking to support local industry and looking at modular housing as another form of delivery of housing stock.

The CHAIR: Terrific. We had a great discussion with Bendigo Bank about loans for it today, which was really interesting. Ballarat.

Joanna CUSCADEN: In terms of the City of Ballarat, we have got a couple of key points we really want to make – and certainly infrastructure and funding gaps. We are obviously a city that incorporates infill and greenfields development. We definitely have a strategic vision to increase the amount of infill, like the state government's planning policy seeks to do. We also seek the same outcome for the City of Ballarat in terms of the development that is occurring. We do have a very strong greenfield market and a strong desire for many people to live in greenfield settings, so that is part of our growth strategy. However, obviously with greenfield development comes costly infrastructure. We can certainly talk to the City of Ballarat's experience with regard to running and administering a DCP, in addition to working with developers on the difficulty of turning farms into housing estates. The other key element we want to talk to – and certainly we will not go into it as much as Hepburn – is around housing affordability, but that is a very big issue for the City of Ballarat. Equally, I know you have heard a lot about housing diversity. Again, that is a really big issue for the City of Ballarat. We have some potential planning solutions that we could suggest to you that would look to, from a policy point of view, encourage housing diversity. Obviously you have heard from developers that say it is very unfeasible to deliver that type of housing, but that is something we really want to push with developers moving forward.

The CHAIR: Terrific. Nat.

Natalie ROBERTSON: Joanna has covered it very well. To reiterate, I think from a City of Ballarat point of view we have positioned ourselves really well in terms of being able to provide for new dwellings. The city have done a power of work on setting ourselves up with housing strategies and growth area frameworks that have positioned us to grow. Currently the data for us is we are about 65 per cent greenfield, 35 per cent infill. Taking that into account and understanding our community, we were thinking 50–50. Obviously with Plan for Vic that has changed a little bit. From a municipal point of view we think we have positioned ourselves really well to adapt to that through the *Plan for Victoria*, because there are great opportunities. We have got renewal

sites that we are looking at in terms of infill, and we have got the capacity for greenfield no matter what the market does.

In terms of land, I do not think that the land supply is the issue; it is all the other things. It is the cost of delivery of infrastructure, it is the labour shortage and industry capacity to do that and, for us, it is probably investor uncertainty and just the economics around housing affordability and diversity and what that is looking like for us as well. There are probably a number of other things, but we will see how the conversation goes today. But we would really love to have the opportunity to talk about what it is that state could probably do to help us to deliver.

The CHAIR: And in Macedon.

Rebecca STOCKFELD: Thank you for this time. Macedon council has very similar issues to these other councils but also a slightly different context. The Macedon Ranges has been declared a distinctive area and landscape under the *Planning and Environment Act*, and each of our towns have protected settlement boundaries around them. When the statement of planning policy was written, council were asked to complete structure planning for Romsey and Gisborne and essentially work out what the protected settlement boundary ought to be – so one was not done for those two towns. Council has completed that work now for both Gisborne and Romsey and has in the last term of council adopted both of those plans. Those plans provide for future settlement for housing growth, employment areas and shops – all the sorts of things townships need to grow. And before we can do any rezoning we actually need, through Parliament, the government to approve the settlement boundaries, and then we can start to rezone that land. One of the hold-ups for us is that there is not, we believe at the current moment, a pathway through for those protected settlement boundaries for Romsey and Gisborne to be enacted, and they are two of our growth areas in a sense. So we are restricted in bringing land to market, basically, despite having identified that land and, certainly in those towns, developers operating to purchase that land and being ready to develop. So that is one of the limitations on our shire.

In places like Romsey, there is not any more land available, so there is a restriction on the supply of housing in that area. So one of the limitations we are seeing is, I guess, working with the state government to get that through – that is something unique to our shire – and then, like the other councils, the sort of mishmash between housing supply and what the demand is. The bulk of the housing, and this is certainly in our written submission, delivered in our shire is three- or four-bedroom family houses, but that is not the reflection of our population spread.

Martha HAYLETT: We have heard that a lot today, and we heard that from Mount Alexander yesterday as well.

Rebecca STOCKFELD: You would hear that a number of times, so I will not go on about that point. I guess there are three points I have written down here that I wanted to make. The other component that we are starting to hear – and you will have heard this from others too – is the utility companies and their ability to meet, in a sense, the state government's housing targets, and our live example of that is Romsey. We are saying under the *Romsey Structure Plan* there are about 2200 houses that can be built – that is just a rough per-hectare estimate of that. Powercor are basically saying to us that with their power infrastructure they have reached the limit of where Romsey can develop, and we are not sure of the pathway forward for getting Powercor to invest more into Romsey to facilitate that development. And we certainly hear that about the wastewater companies as well. But I thought Powercor was a particularly interesting example to raise today.

The CHAIR: And what is the population of Romsey?

Rebecca STOCKFELD: I have not got that in front of me, sorry.

The CHAIR: That is all right. I can google it.

Rebecca STOCKFELD: I can look it up as well. And then Gisborne: we are saying there are probably an extra 4700 houses, and some of that is infill; the bulk is greenfield development that we are expecting. But until the state government bring in its protected settlement boundary that land cannot go through a rezoning process.

Martha HAYLETT: How do you think that the government can help assist with some of those issues? Because we have heard a lot in the last few days around Powercor issues, water issues, sewerage issues – that

trunk infrastructure. Where do you think the Victorian government can help councils with those issues, in terms of how we unlock some of those areas like Romsey for more homes?

Rebecca STOCKFELD: I do not know the entire answer. I have read lots of the submissions to this inquiry, and I do know that none of the utility companies made a submission. I thought that was of interest in a sense, because they would know because they hear this from developers as well.

Jordan CRUGNALE: We can ask.

Rebecca STOCKFELD: But the state government's posture on the provision of land for housing has really said to local government, 'You need to get yourselves in a posture to deliver land.' Macedon would say, 'Well, we're doing that in the structure planning work we've done.' And the other councils here are saying, 'We're doing that as well.' I guess the question is: does the state government have the authority to also start to say that to the utility companies? I understand there are costs and those sorts of things in that, but where you have got quite a large supply of land there needs to be some sort of regulation around how that needs to be provided. Otherwise, the housing demand is not going to be met, and that is not through land availability, that is just through utility availability.

The CHAIR: Are there any other examples at the different councils of that issue?

Natalie ROBERTSON: I could probably answer that in context for us. Obviously utility providers – so Central Highlands Water, their budgets are done five years in advance off the top of my head, and it is legislated. The framework cannot be changed unless they go through and get board approvals and all sorts of things. It is a very restricted budget process as well. There is no flexibility in it unless they can plan for the future. We have certainly had reassurances that we can work together for delivery, but Central Highlands would probably be a great example because they need an infrastructure plan as well. I think land supply and realising it is great. What comes with that is a really solid infrastructure plan, and I do not just mean from council but utility providers et cetera as well, because then we know what it will cost us to develop and there is a framework for bringing it on. I think that is a great role that the state can play for us because it is an overarching infrastructure plan that considers everything. It is not just utilities. It is also roads and everything as well that comes into that. I suppose we are thinking state authorities as well like VicRoads or regional roads and other infrastructure providers as well. The biggest challenge is understanding the context for cost of infrastructure, not just for infill but for growth as well. It comes at a significant cost to a developer, to council and to utility providers, but we have all got to have a plan to be able to deliver on that so houses can come out of the ground.

The CHAIR: I know a lot more about pump stations than I did 12 months ago – pump stations in Ballarat's south-west. Martha and I obviously are very interested in Ballarat-Carngham Road and safety for students there as well.

Natalie ROBERTSON: I could talk about it for hours.

The CHAIR: There are lots of big issues. What about in Hepburn?

Ron TORRES: Chair Addison, I think Hepburn's approach is slightly different. It is a planning land use approach in that we have recently successfully finished a strategic land use strategy across the entire shire known as Future Hepburn; you may have heard of it. That plan is the collective vision for our shire for the next 30 years. What it attempts to do is to consolidate housing into our townships and settlements primarily. We have five structure plans that really tell the utility providers where our future growth is targeted around those townships and what expectations we and the community have for utilities and other public facilities such as schools, hospitals and that sort of thing. So our road map, so to speak, should be pretty clear for all the providers to follow and implement over the next 30 years.

The CHAIR: Jordan, did you have a question?

Jordan CRUGNALE: Yes. I think with the DAL – were Romsey and Gisborne not in the DAL at all but set aside for future work?

Rebecca STOCKFELD: No. The whole shire is within the DAL. When it was enacted – it was the first one enacted, so it is a bit of a test.

Jordan CRUGNALE: I am in the Bass Coast, so we are in that process now.

Rebecca STOCKFELD: So ours is a sort of a test one, if you like. Each of the towns that had a structure plan that was basically up to date at the time had a protected settlement boundary put on to it. At the time the minister said both Romsey and Gisborne clearly needed further work, which was not disagreed with by council. So in the statement of planning policy those two towns need to still have that work done. But what the statement of planning policy that supports the DAL in a sense does is set out a settlement hierarchy for each of the towns. It is very clear that Kyneton, Gisborne and Romsey are our main towns. Kyneton and Gisborne are the larger two of the three of those, and then the other towns have a lesser population role in that. That work was expected to be done, and in fact that work for the structure planning for both those towns was supported by state government funding. That has now been concluded.

Jordan CRUGNALE: So they just need to go through that process now to be incorporated into the DAL?

Rebecca STOCKFELD: Yes, the work done to do the settlement boundaries.

Martha HAYLETT: Can I ask a little bit more about Lenka's role, because not every council has a housing officer. I just want you to share a bit more with the committee about what your role is and what Hepburn is doing to address the housing shortage in your area.

Lenka THOMPSON: Yes, sure. Hepburn Shire Council had adopted their affordable housing strategy *A Home in Hepburn Shire* and they had also just finished their work on Future Hepburn. My role is essentially bringing those two strategies together to try and implement the actions from the affordable housing strategy, which is looking at things like council-owned land for potential affordable housing projects and then focusing on that land that falls within those town boundaries that the Future Hepburn work identified.

I have only been in the role since December, so it is a new role but I appreciate that it is a role that is not everywhere. I note that Mount Alexander has a similar role as well. It is about forming relationships with the community housing sector, with the developer sector, with council, with philanthropists and with the community. We have got a very active community that are interested in this topic of finding housing for the residents and working through how we still provide our tourism attraction in the Hepburn shire but then also finding houses for the workers who need to service that industry.

Martha HAYLETT: We have heard a lot over the last few days about inclusionary zoning, and some people are interested in it, some people are not so much interested in it, depending on who you speak to. As the three shires here and neighbouring here, what are your thoughts and your councils' thoughts on options around inclusionary zoning for social and affordable housing?

Ron TORRES: I think if you ask five planners, you will get five different answers. As a planner I am supportive of that because it provides clarity to the planning system and certainty for the community and for developers alike. And it could come in various forms, such as fast-tracking through the system or mandating a particular proportion of housing in a development and so on. But it cannot be one size fits all across Victoria. In metropolitan Melbourne that context is very different to the rural and regional context, and potentially at Hepburn shire at least we would not get the intensity and density of housing developments as you would in, say, the Ballarat context. So it may not deliver as much if you did a one-size-fits-all approach. It needs to be a more nuanced approach.

Joanna CUSCADEN: I think for the City of Ballarat, even we would not have the demand for inclusionary zoning. So while from a principles point of view we would very much support that idea, and it is something that we are looking at incorporating into our CBD planning controls – that is one of our big urban renewal sites where we see a lot of future development to occur. You can do a lot of things around density bonus, so in metropolitan Melbourne that would be a great incentive because you can get additional height by providing things like social and affordable housing. Sometimes they put great design. If you have great design, you can go higher as well. That is a great carrot in metropolitan Melbourne but potentially is harder to achieve in places like the City of Ballarat, but from a principles point of view it is certainly a great idea.

The CHAIR: Some of the witnesses today talking in the Ballarat context have said that 60–40 is unviable, that it is just not feasible, that any projects that could have been done have been done and that the future really needs to continue to be greenfield for a significant period in terms of the demand. The City of Ballarat have

already mentioned that you do believe there is great opportunity for infill. Where is the disconnect? What do you see that they are not seeing?

Natalie ROBERTSON: My first thought is that there is great capacity for infill, but we have up until now experienced challenges with infill development, particularly where we have had challenges – we have had flooding, there are all those sorts of issues. But we have positioned ourselves with the housing strategy for a residential zones review, and in our housing strategy we identify half a dozen or so areas where we would encourage those areas to have higher intensity development: think Wendouree, think Sebas and parts of Ballarat East and things like that. If we were forging ahead with our plan – which we are, because we feel it aligns enough with the Plan for Vic strategy – we would be bringing on those areas to encourage that higher density development that would achieve the targets that we think we are looking for in terms of the 40–60. I think there is a real need for us to encourage more infill within the CBD and our existing residential zones.

Where I think the disconnect is is certainly we are coming to a point with our growth that we have currently got one growth area that – it is not the technical term, but – it went gangbusters during the COVID period. I think we delivered in 2021 two thousand lots or something to that effect in that area. But it is slowing down because that area is constrained and other issues outside of planning are slowing down development in our greenfield areas. What we need to do is probably give certainty to our growth area developers that there are, and I did hear them comment on it today and we have identified future growth areas, but they are not zoned yet. They are council's adopted future growth areas, but they are not yet zoned. Many of these developers have been on a journey with us in terms of how you get growth areas up and running, so it does take a very long time. I think the fear is, with what remains with Ballarat West – which from a technical point of view there actually is a reasonably good land supply there – and from what will come on board for us soon, which is the northern growth area, there is reasonable land supply there, but again it is still just zoned as a UGZ at the moment. The precinct structure plan work is happening, and all those things that take several years to bring growth areas on board. So I think the challenge is that there is not certainty around greenfield, because obviously Plan for Vic does not incorporate our unzoned identified growth areas. That is a conversation for another time, but that will be a great opportunity to give certainty for the future, whether it is out to 2051 and probably beyond, to greenfield development, but to also allow us to do the work that would encourage that infill, because that is just as important to us.

Joanna CUSCADEN: Just to add to that, we will start with infill. One of the interesting concepts for infill is decentralisation. You would have heard a lot about Geelong, for example. They have some significant employers and investment from state government. That means that they really get a strong population influx into the actual city itself. The City of Ballarat obviously is in an interesting location in that it is quite close to Melbourne, so you could live in Ballarat and work in Melbourne or vice versa; you do not really need to live in that particular place. So really putting strategic effort from all levels of government to invest in jobs and housing within the infill area itself would be a fantastic outcome to really draw the demand. You need demand in order for the development to occur, so I think that is an interesting thing. From a greenfields point of view, the City of Ballarat is working really hard to continue with the rollout of greenfields. We currently sit at a \$77 million shortfall in delivering all of the infrastructure that is required too. So yes, greenfields is a great thing and it is a great type of housing that we need to be providing to the community, but we need to temper that with an understanding that someone has got to foot the bill for infrastructure as well, which makes it difficult then for the City of Ballarat's finances.

Natalie ROBERTSON: When we talk about the \$77 million shortfall, obviously we have the DCPs – or development contribution plans – so the developer will contribute, council does contribute and in various ways government contributes as well. But we still have that shortfall, and we know with our amendment that infrastructure gap or that funding gap will increase.

The CHAIR: Terrific. Thanks.

Martin CAMERON: Did Plan Vic miss the mark for regional Victoria with what they put out? Has it made your job as planners in council harder? Are there more regulations that you need to follow, which slows things up?

Natalie ROBERTSON: I think Plan Vic's intentions are good. I think it is more that there are still questions, and that is the hardest part, or if there are actions – a dozen or so actions in there – more than half of

them still have questions and 'To be confirmed'. So that is the hard part. You cannot hit the ground running. You have still got a lot of work to do before you do provide certainty and clarity to all the people out there who are asking you the question, 'How as a city are you going to flip us to 60–40 when we are currently the other way – 35–65?', for example. Jo works in Plan for Vic a bit more than I do in terms of the content. Have you got some comments?

Joanna CUSCADEN: I was going to say that we should probably ask the smaller councils –

Natalie ROBERTSON: Yes, true.

Joanna CUSCADEN: because Geelong, Bendigo and Ballarat get quite a few pages, which is nice, but I understand that the *Plan for Victoria* actually cancels out the growth framework plans that regional councils have used a lot more –

Rebecca STOCKFELD: I think intends to – they are still in the planning scheme at present.

Joanna CUSCADEN: Intends to – yes.

Martin CAMERON: So what would be a help for you? Is it a voice from the minister's office to clarify all these questions? What can we take back to make your life easier?

Natalie ROBERTSON: Well, although it is a *Plan for Victoria*, we are not apples for apples, and I think that is clear – so strong engagement as soon as possible with each municipality. And from our point of view we need to get in front of state to say, 'We've done a lot of strategic work that still sits on the minister's desk that really does bring us a long way into the journey of delivering for you' – housing strategies, growth areas framework plans – and yet we still do not know if state will give us their infrastructure growth areas framework, which they had been working on prior to us doing our work. So there is a lot of stuff where, if we have certainty on that, we can push forward with the planning that will allow us to deliver on the Plan for Vic but also give certainty to not just our developer community but our community as a whole.

Ron TORRES: Yes. Plan Vic really supports much of the strategic work the councils at this table have performed over the past few years, and our strategic work supports Plan Vic. It is really at the implementation stage through the state government that we need support so that we can achieve the vision and outcomes of Plan Vic. I must say that *Plan for Victoria* is part of a wider state government planning reform program, and I draw the committee's attention to the recent MAV submission on the state government's planning reform program. There are a number of excellent suggestions in that paper that will help your understanding of what can help support regional and rural councils.

The CHAIR: Excellent. Thank you for that. There are lots of people taking notes; we are all very, very interested.

Martin CAMERON: That is it. With our workers and developers coming through, we hear all the time about how hard it is to get workers to build the houses and so forth. Does that flow through to councils having the right staff in their planning departments and enough staff so that we can move as quickly as possible a builder's plan that goes in to start a house? I will open it up to Ron first.

Ron TORRES: Thank you. You have struck a chord with us, because we do find the whole planning environment challenging at a small rural shire. Really, there are challenges of volume of applications and attraction and retention of staff. Part of that problem is through affordable housing within the shire. I have some staff working in Daylesford who live in Geelong and commute and so on. I think it is the Planning Institute of Australia that recently issued a paper on the challenges of the planning framework and retaining staff in the regions. That paper is quite informative. But part of this whole housing delivery ecosystem is also state government agencies. So, whilst the council may be efficient in processing applications, often it is the under-resourced public agencies that we need to refer applications to that have difficulty in providing meaningful comment. It would be a brave council to ignore the input of those agencies, such as the CFA for our high bushfire risk shire, or water authorities, because we are in a special catchment area, and so on. It is no criticism of them, but the state government really needs to support those public agencies as well in helping deliver housing through the planning system.

Joanna CUSCADEN: We share similar concerns. I think one thing just to add, in addition to that, is it was a real shame that the La Trobe University in Bendigo shut down, and as a planning profession I do not think we are graduating enough planners. I think that is a real problem for regional councils particularly, because obviously there is no demand – there is less demand for jobs in the regions.

Martha HAYLETT: How are you finding the planning hubs? Like, how has that been, your connection with the planning hubs? I hear all the time at the nine councils I cover that you all poach each other's planners, and it is just so hard to find planners.

Rebecca STOCKFELD: We do.

Martha HAYLETT: How do you find the hubs? Because they are, hopefully, trying to connect you more and give you a little bit of extra capacity. Can you tell us about your experience with them?

Rebecca STOCKFELD: I can talk to the planning hubs a bit. We at our council in Macedon have actually used the planning hubs to help us with some of our strategic planning work and in particular doing community infrastructure assessments for one of our towns. I think they helped us with Gisborne on that. We have also used the planning hub for some of the flood amendment work that we have done. So in that space we have found the planning hubs to be absolutely terrific.

We have not sent them our statutory planning work. We tend to have a fairly high number of planners at our council. Our struggle is more in getting experienced planners. We have got a full set of numbers against our structure, but it can be hard to get people with the depth of experience that we need. That being said, our numbers are about right. And the comments that Ron made earlier about referral authorities we would agree with as well; that is something that can hold things up for some time, and the state does have a role in supporting those agencies. And those agencies – you know, we all struggle to get experienced staff and in the regions retain experienced staff.

The other part about the workforce is that it is not just the in-house workforce; it is actually just the workforce in the development industry. Under *Plan for Victoria* it says that for a council like ours, with our housing target, you would need to build on average 510 houses a year to deliver that. Our council delivers about 390 houses a year on average, just looking at our numbers over the last 10 years, and the only time we have been up in the 500s was for one year during COVID. I think that is not just a reflection land release; that is a reflection on, you know, the capacity of the whole construction workforce, the civil workforce, to deliver across the state when developers are in a sense competing with each other for the same staff.

So in delivering housing, I am not sure how certain the development industry is on whether it can really deliver those numbers either. You are putting aside all the arguments about whether it is infill or greenfield. I am not sure that if it was all greenfield they would still meet those numbers, just because of the size of their workforce.

Natalie ROBERTSON: It is a good point. I think we can prepare ourselves, from a regulatory point of view or a planning point of view, quite well. Whatever those drivers are – the market, the trade – everything can bring that to fruition. I think it equates for us to about 1800 dwellings a year to deliver on Plan for Vic, so it is a large –

Rebecca STOCKFELD: It is a big number.

Natalie ROBERTSON: It is a big number, yes, when we have only sort of delivered that ourselves. COVID is obviously the exception because they were unprecedented times. But yes, it is a good point. And for us, from a staffing point of view, we feel like – Joanna might disagree with me – we have established a fantastic team, and it has taken quite a while. I really would say there was a period there, probably two or three years ago, when it was very hard to attract staff. Planning just was not a desirable field at local government level. It is challenging at the best of times, and we are often seen as the gatekeepers of all things, so to attract staff, and experienced staff, was challenging. We have settled into a great team now – and when I say a great team, also in terms of numbers – but that all comes with doing all those things that make you an employer of choice. We are probably lucky because we are situated where we can offer working-from-home arrangements or nine-day fortnights or other incentives, but I feel that is because we are a larger regional city. Geelong and Bendigo are probably similar, but the smaller ones are going to have challenges.

The CHAIR: When we were in Mount Alexander shire we met with the mayor and the CEO and the amazing Clare – and I cannot remember the amazing Clare’s surname.

Lenka THOMPSON: Richards.

The CHAIR: Richards. Yes, you know Clare Richards. Mount Alexander has made a bold statement to say that housing is their number one issue. I talked to them about rates and rubbish and recycling and all the other stuff, and they have said that housing is their number one issue and they are going to put in their resources and millions of dollars to address issues of homelessness. Is there a similar appetite amongst your councils – starting with Hepburn?

Lenka THOMPSON: I guess I am living proof that Hepburn shire is investing in the more affordable housing space and the social housing space. In terms of homelessness I know that we have some fantastic homelessness services at our fingertips, and I guess I am working my best across the board, because when you are working in the supply of housing it is not just within the planning department; you need to be working with your property department and your economic development department. So there is like an internal working relationship that you need to establish in order to deliver on housing – and also making relationships with the government agencies like Homes Vic and members.

In terms of Hepburn shire, in current work we are looking at our own land to identify whether there is some in-town land that is accessible or attractive for investment. We are working really hard to establish that kind of foothold in the market because we realise, although we did not really attract much from the Big Housing Build, we are still a council that is open to negotiation and collaboration with partners in order to deliver affordable housing for our workers and for our residents and future residents.

Natalie ROBERTSON: I think, if I were to reflect conversations we have had with councillors and community – obviously we are in the middle of our council plan work at the moment – what comes through very strongly for Ballarat first is safety and crime. It sits nearly at the top for resident concerns. I think the next one is related to standard of living – so the crisis that we are in in terms of the financial crisis at the moment for the average community member. Then it is rates, roads and rubbish, and housing supply and affordability sort of sit in there somewhere but never come up at the top. It sits in there when you start to talk about all the things that are the other priorities – safety, crime and all those sorts of things. If you are a Ballarat local, you will have realised that our homelessness and our social issues related to that have really escalated in the last few years. That has a lot to do with the services that support that and the network around it, and we hear that those services and those networks are challenged for funding and resources as well, and then even when they can connect with those that are disadvantaged, there is no housing supply or ability to provide the service that they need. It all does come down to that in the end.

The way we are dealing with it is we recognise that we have got to find those avenues. So obviously, how can we provide opportunities for intensification of infill, how can we provide opportunities so that development includes some social affordable housing. Joint ventures: council has got land, and we did an expression of interest. We are trying to explore those opportunities, and we are talking with state around land that they have where we can help facilitate any type of development that might support that, but it is a long process. It does not come out of the ground quickly.

The CHAIR: And Macedon.

Rebecca STOCKFELD: In Macedon, like all the other councils we are in the process of doing our council plan and have done lots of engagement with the community, and there is a big range of issues our community bring up. But I know our council has an affordable housing policy, which is really there to guide and facilitate social housing and affordable housing. And the focus council has had in that space is on social housing because we actually have – I am not sure of the total number – some social housing in a couple of our towns that is run through a different supplier, but it is council-owned land, and we have been advocating for the big build, through Future Homes, to do up those houses and potentially provide more houses on those lots. One of those will come to fruition and the other we are still advocating for.

When I talk to my planning colleagues in the workplace, our absolute focus is on actually just bringing land to market and, quite frankly, getting any housing, because it is becoming a struggle to get that there. That being said, our opportunity and where we are working with the state government at the moment on what we do with

the site is the former home of the Malmsbury Youth Justice Centre, which is a really large site on the edge of Malmsbury. I am not saying that is going to go to housing, but we have certainly just started a working group on what happens on that site long term.

Martha HAYLETT: We have heard a lot in the last few days from builders and developers about just how long they feel it is taking to build housing at the moment, and many have used the language around red tape and processes taking too long. I am just keen to hear your perspectives on how the Victorian government can streamline processes more. You know, with your planning hats on and your housing officer hats on, you would know the process and all the different steps it takes to get that housing yield. Where do you think the streamlining can happen, or are there processes that you think could be cut back or changed to be able to get more housing more quickly?

Ron TORRES: I will add that the planning process and the perceived length of time is really just one aspect of the whole housing delivery journey. It is important to understand that it is just one aspect. There has been data gathered that demonstrates that there have been many permits for houses issued by local government that have not been acted on. That is the other side of the story, and it is important to dig into the reasons why that might be, the financial context, the materials and so on. So yes, it is not just the local government planning process, but certainly improvements can be made and streamlining can be done at various stages of that.

I have mentioned the role of referral authorities and so on: do not take them out, but help support that process as well as other councils who are struggling financially in terms of competing with large councils in attracting staff and so on.

Jordan CRUGNALE: We had previously some of the developers talking about those referrals to the statutory authorities and what have you – and the clock ticks and keeps ticking over – and their suggestion, or something to potentially look at, was to have a standard set of conditions so if it defaults past the 30 days, then the standard set of conditions that is agreed upon gets put on. Then it might get them a bit more active to add to it or not. What are your thoughts around having that? This would be like CFA, water and catchment management authorities.

Natalie ROBERTSON: I am really happy to speak to that. From a subdivision point of view, nine times out of 10 your referral authority's standard conditions are standard conditions. Central Highlands Water, Powercor, gas if there is one, electricity and NBN – they are all standard conditions, and we could tell you what they are without having to go to the referral authority. Where it gets held up is where there is a challenge – nine times out of 10. It may not even be at the actual planning permit stage. The planning permit might roll out quite easily. To get into the technicalities of planning, it might be at the certification or statement of compliance of a subdivision – that is, you are getting ready to put it on ground. That is when you get into the nitty-gritty of civil engineering plans and drainage and all that sort of thing. From a planning point of view, if a developer is saying to just put a set of standard conditions on, nine times out of 10 that is probably right, but if it is being held up by an external referral authority, it is probably because there is a technicality or an issue. So I appreciate that. Trust me, we are all talking about things we have all considered ourselves many times over as planners. It is hard to say, 'Yes, we'll just roll it out.' Nine times out of 10 it probably is possible and you can safely do it, or there is just a standard condition that comes back. It is when it is an issue. If we gave a permit that just had the standard condition on it, at some point they will be dealing with it anyway. They will be dealing with it through that certification or statement of compliance process, because obviously there was an issue.

Joanna CUSCADEN: I think local government planners cop a lot, and I think that probably goes to the reason why it is difficult to retain staff. It is a really difficult job. You are pushed and pulled in lots of different directions. There are a lot of really good people in local government doing a lot of really good stuff. I think it is not supply necessarily that is the problem with the housing crisis. The first lesson I learned when I started planning was that planning is a very small part of what is a very large pie. We have issued a number of permits for new estates that have been held back from market. For various reasons the developers never tell us why necessarily. I really think it is a difficult thing to lay blame on local government planning for the housing crisis, because it is not as simple as that.

Rebecca STOCKFELD: I might just add to that referral discussion. We have recently entered into an MOU with a number of our referral authorities to actually take out of the system anything that is simple and straightforward, and lots of councils will have that. Where we are referring things it is usually because it is

complex. The referral authority may have assets. I am thinking of water authorities – both water supply and rural water authorities will have assets that they need to consider as part of that. They are not just seeing it because we have sent it to them; they actually have an interest in it. Obviously in probably all of our shires bushfire risk is a really high risk. It would be a very brave planner who says, ‘Sorry, CFA, you missed your 28 days. I am now just going to issue the permit,’ because we learned through the Black Saturday fires that planning and bushfire work need to go hand in hand around that.

Natalie ROBERTSON: And a good one: we had a Biznet breakfast here, which was actually for a lot of this context and housing supply, and the big thing that I heard from our developers was – particularly infill, but greenfield does experience it – that tackling the civil engineering component of a major multidwelling development comes down to meeting the one-in-100-year requirements. It is technical, it is very costly and you have got to get it right. Often the developer goes to and fro a lot, because you have got to get that drainage right for what is going in the ground and what it supports around it. I can tell you, nine times out of 10 when a developer comes with a planning permit, they are complaining to me about the civil side of it – ‘How are we going to get this out of the ground?’ – and the cost to get it out of the ground. That is a great example. We have got planning permits for a high-rise multidwelling in a very central part of Ballarat that we approved probably 10, 12 years ago, and we cannot get anybody to build it. It is just not viable. So we are just looking for opportunities – how can we get this out of the ground? – with great input from the state. Let us consolidate flood overlay requirements so that the state takes the risk and the councils do not take the risk, and things like that. As I said, I could probably talk to you for hours, but there are some really great examples that go beyond the planning and look at the other aspects. And we could probably get some things out of the ground.

Rebecca STOCKFELD: It is a good point you raise about the flooding. It is part of our submission as well. Following Black Saturday, the state government took over bushfire mapping overlays, which they sort of update I think every six months. They write to us with a range of changes they are bringing in. We, along with probably most of the councils here, have been encouraging the state government to take over all risk management of overlays, particularly flooding, obviously, and then any other environmental risks as well, because in the state not doing that, it relies on a very lengthy standard process through an amendment process for council to do that. So the catchment management authorities do the data mapping, local government picks that up and runs an amendment process, there are potentially panel hearings and you are looking at potentially a 2- to 3-year process for something that in bushfire, we feel, is brought in overnight. It should be the same sort of standard for that high-risk mapping.

Natalie ROBERTSON: Yes.

Rebecca STOCKFELD: I am not sure if that was agreement.

Natalie ROBERTSON: Yes. Agree.

Jordan CRUGNALE: Everyone is nodding. Okay.

The CHAIR: Well, look at that: 4:12. Hasn’t that gone quickly, that hour. We have really valued your time, but we also want to make sure that there is nothing that we have missed in terms of our questions of you. Obviously, you have made submissions as well. Is there anything else that you really want us to know in terms of the recommendations that we are going to be putting forward when we table our report in the Parliament? The government then has six months to respond to them. Is there anything about which you sit there going, ‘If only someone would listen?’ We are here. Just in our last few minutes, is there anything else that you lie in bed and think about at night and go, ‘Why?’ Please, we are not councillors, but we are happy to help.

Ron TORRES: I am not sure you can solve this, but it is important to know that in contrast to my inner metropolitan Melbourne planning experience, land use planning in a small rural council or the regional councils is so much more complex. The issues are so much more pointed. I would say inner metro planning is easy compared to this. You have got bushfire risk, you have got water management, you have got onsite wastewater to deal with. Vegetation is held in high regard. The quality of our rural landscapes and our farmland contributing to the food for Victoria is such a strong issue here. Heritage, neighbourhood character, the mining – history makes planning complex here, and so on and so forth. I could go on for hours, but it is important for the committee to understand that it is a very different context to metropolitan housing delivery.

The CHAIR: Absolutely.

Joanna CUSCADEN: In terms of housing diversity, if that is something you have heard a lot about, something that you could consider is either mandatory or much stronger requirements in the planning scheme for, say, 10 or more dwellings to require housing diversity reports, which would then determine what type of housing diversity would be appropriate for that particular application.

The CHAIR: That is a really good point.

Rebecca STOCKFELD: Great point. So housing diversity is one of mine, and it is a reflection – and I sort of have an imagined answer. So for Gisborne, structure planning and our council's proposed protected settlement boundary, that took us six years – so essentially two council terms – an enormous of engagement with the community and an enormous amount of technical and expert reports to assist the formation of that, to finally get a document adopted that would then potentially go through a state process, which would be almost the same, going back to the community and potentially back to the major developers in that area to hear those arguments again. And I just think, 'Are we repeating ourselves twice to get a' – and I know council and the minister require a level of certainty when they make those decisions and, particularly in our case, they give a report to Parliament, but I think it cannot be just doing the same process twice in two different settings that is the right answer.

Joanna CUSCADEN: I have got one more, which I will stay awake at night –

The CHAIR: Go for it. I think Lenka has got one too.

Lenka THOMPSON: When you said, 'What keeps you up at night, Lenka?' one of the things that I always wonder about, like moving into Hepburn shire, is why we did not get any investment from the Big Housing Build into the shire, like a guaranteed minimum investment. So that is something that I always have at front of mind when I am working towards trying to get more investment or more collaboration or partnership into the shire, because given the work that we have done – like now we have got Future Hepburn – we need the resources and help to implement that into the planning scheme so it gives that assurance to future investors and collaborators. Also, about getting proportionate allocation of our short-stay levy – that has now been funnelled into Homes Victoria to bring that back into our shire so we can reinvest it. Yes, so that is pretty much all – just bringing more investment into our shire. Because as a small, rural shire, you know, the projects are not as big, but they have just as much impact on the ground.

Jordan CRUGNALE: So with housing, Homes Vic, you have done the work with Future Hepburn, and so now it is kind of wanting –

Lenka THOMPSON: Yes. Now we need to get it into the planning scheme.

Jordan CRUGNALE: a funding allocation I guess to be able to, yes, support it, to implement it.

Ron TORRES: Funding to implement that program and get it through into our planning schemes and codify it.

Joanna CUSCADEN: We definitely need that too, but what I was going to say was if you have the ability to provide recommendations to government about planning scheme amendments, that is a really long and drawn-out process for local government. So a suggestion that we could make is a planning panel. Sometimes you spend hundreds of thousands of dollars to make it all the way to a planning panel to then, in some cases, get sent back to the drawing board to start again. If there are opportunities to explore other ways that planning panels might be able to come up at the start of the process to just make sure the strategic justification is there, and then you go on with your process. We did have a former councillor who once said to us, 'I will never understand why you need a strategy to do a strategy.' That is very much how strategic planning works. It is convoluted and complex and takes a long time. We all get bogged down in what we are doing and then, four years later, we finish the project.

Natalie ROBERTSON: We scared him so much he did not come back. For me it is about infrastructure and cost and a commitment from state, perhaps, that we look at an infrastructure plan that works with the Plan for Vic. You know, as a council we have to plan for infrastructure and what that is going to cost us over a 10-year period, for example. It would be great if we could have some certainty out of state. If they know what infrastructure we need and the cost, perhaps there can be a plan around, 'We know what we might receive from

state.’ And I know that is the utopia of the world, but when you think about Ballarat-Carngham Road and how important that is to our growth, imagine if we understood the delivery of it – we would then understand the delivery of our growth areas.

Martha HAYLETT: Just on that planning panel point, because we have heard especially today a lot that the authorising environment is not there as much and that you go to one authority and they say, ‘Oh, it’s that person,’ and then they say, ‘It’s that person,’ and you are just kind of going around in circles. And so that is a really good point about how maybe we need a planning panel sooner to almost be the mediators and just say, ‘This is what’s happening. Let’s move forward.’

Natalie ROBERTSON: A really good example is that we have to do all the strategic work and go to state and say, ‘We want to embark on it,’ and then we have to do our own public exhibition and we have to get council approval. And then we seem to go through the process again; once it is with the minister, we have got to do the public exhibition and then you get submissions again and panels. There has got to be a way to expedite it.

Rebecca STOCKFELD: Which is the point I was making – we are doing the same process twice.

The CHAIR: I am conscious of my Gippsland colleagues who are travelling home tonight. This is a conversation that –

Jordan CRUGNALE: We need a coastal erosion overlay where we are.

The CHAIR: It is a conversation. Thank you very much for your honesty and for, being a group of planners who are very good at technical detail, using language that we could understand. That is incredibly helpful. I just want to say that we really do appreciate the amount of time that you have given to us today, and your expertise, to support our inquiry. If there is additional information or additional responses that you would like to provide – if you go home and go, ‘I really should have included this’ – please contact our secretariat, because we are really keen to listen. We want a really robust report. We have not asked for people to be gentle and soft; we want a robust report that we are all incredibly proud of, which we will table in the Parliament in November. Then the government is going to have to respond. We look forward to that. So thank you very much.

Thank you to Hansard; you have been exceptional. I want that on Hansard: Hansard is exceptional. Drive safe, be good and thank you to the secretariat.

Committee adjourned.