

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

Melbourne – Friday 20 June 2025

MEMBERS

Juliana Addison – Chair
Martin Cameron – Deputy Chair
Jordan Crugnale
Daniela De Martino

Wayne Farnham
Martha Haylett
David Hodgett

WITNESSES (*via videoconference*)

Christine Plant, and

Shane Graham, Housing Action: Greater Swan Hill; and

Cr Stuart King, Mayor,

Scott Barber, Chief Executive Officer, and

Michelle Grainger, Director, Development and Planning, Swan Hill Rural City Council.

The CHAIR: It is terrific to be here for the public hearing into the regional supply of housing on our last day of sitting, and we are so pleased to be able to be joined today by Swan Hill Rural City Council and the Housing Action: Greater Swan Hill community committee. So thank you so much for making the time to be here.

I will just run through some important formalities before we begin. 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 you give. However, it is important to remember that parliamentary privilege does not apply to comments made outside the 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. We really appreciate it. My name is Juliana Addison. I am the Member for Wendouree representing central Ballarat and Chair of this committee.

Martin CAMERON: My name is Martin Cameron. I am the Deputy Chair, and I represent the seat of Morwell, which is in the Latrobe Valley.

Wayne FARNHAM: My name is Wayne Farnham. I am the state Member for Narracan, which represents the West Gippsland area.

Daniela DE MARTINO: I am Daniela De Martino. I am the state Member for Monbulk, which covers the Dandenong Ranges.

Jordan CRUGNALE: My name is Jordan Crugnale, the state Member for Bass, covering the areas from Pearcedale through to Clyde, Phillip Island, Wonthaggi and Inverloch.

Martha HAYLETT: And I am Martha Haylett, the Member for Ripon, representing the outskirts of Ballarat and then much of the Grampians and Loddon Mallee area as well. Thanks so much for being here.

The CHAIR: We are really looking forward to hearing about what is going on in Swan Hill and the vast expanse of north-west Victoria that you represent, so thank you very much for being here. So far, the committee has travelled to the Grampians, we have been down to the south-west coast, we have been to Gippsland, and we have been up to the Central Goldfields and visited Castlemaine, and now it is really great to be able to get some input for our important inquiry from north-west Victoria, so thank you very much for being here.

Just to start off with, could you just give us a sense of some of the challenges in terms of housing in Swan Hill and the greater Swan Hill area?

Stuart KING: Yes. Good morning – Stuart King, Mayor, Swan Hill Rural City Council. Thank you for the opportunity to present to the committee this morning. We really appreciate it, and the invitation is still there for you to come and visit our region of course, even though we are meeting on the screen this morning.

It is a statewide problem, we acknowledge that – we have similar problems in our council area, but we do not like to just focus on problems. We would probably like to focus on the solutions and the things that we are doing in our municipality to help solve this problem.

Our council has a long history of being involved in housing. We started more than 10 years ago with a development in the suburb of Tower Hill, which is just on the outskirts of Swan Hill and which was unused council land. In conjunction with the former Places Victoria we were able to turn that land into a development that has now got more than 400 houses on it as well as parklands and other infrastructure. There is room – we are only about a third of the way through that land. So that is a significant development, but it was one that was started by council to stimulate development particularly in Swan Hill where developers were not really doing anything. We have also done a lot of work in Robinvale, and we are grateful for some significant funding that we have had up there. We turned \$500,000 of funding a few years ago into eight brand new townhouses, which have now been sold and are helping house professionals in particular in Robinvale. We have recently received \$5 million from the Regional Worker Accommodation Fund where we will repurpose an old kindergarten site in McCartney Court and build 10 townhouses on that site.

Council has also been involved in strategic land acquisitions, and one of the sites is in the report as well, around McCrae Street, where we can see opportunities particularly in Swan Hill on this one – opportunities for us to be able to buy land in great places to enable development, and whether that is direct development by council or whether that is to attract developers to undertake that development, we recognise that there is strategic land that needs to be developed. It will support particularly services like the hospital; that land is near the hospital, and we know that with our hospital a lot of their staff are living in motel rooms every night of the week, which is completely unacceptable.

So I guess just to sum that up, we have got success in the past; we know that partnerships are a key to that success. We have a council of councillors and council staff who are proactive and want to create solutions – we do not just want to focus on the problems – and we have got a community that is behind us. I am grateful that Shane and Christine are on this call as well. They have been a significant part of the Swan Hill housing action group, which was formed by volunteers out of the housing summit that we conducted about 18 months ago. They are kicking goals, and they are helping to get things done in the community as well.

I do not know whether or not I answered your question, because I do not think I focused on problems, I think I focused on solutions. Hopefully you get the idea that we are here to work with whatever partnerships we can come up with, whether they are with state government, federal government or private developers. We are a proactive council, and we are creating solutions. We have got runs on the board, but we still need more help to put more runs on the board.

The CHAIR: Terrific. Thank you so much, Stuart. Christine or Shane, obviously councils working with community is so important. Is there anything you would like to add to that answer?

Christine PLANT: Thanks for the opportunity. I am Christine Plant. I am a farmer from Manangatang. I would like to give you a high-level overview of an exciting new project that we have got coming up. As Stuart said, we know housing is in short supply. Demand is really high, and it will only get worse when the nearby Goschen mine becomes operational. The problem that we have is that for a single investor, houses are just too expensive to build. So working with the Swan Hill housing action committee, what we have done is to set up an investment group, and we are looking to put together a syndicate of smaller investors. Council have allocated two blocks to the project and will become a partner and shareholder. We plan to build two homes and then to sell them when the build is completed. Because we have got a syndicate, we need to set up a unit trust and that will be the legal entity with investors as shareholders, and because council is involved and it is a community project, we want to give all local businesses the opportunity to participate in the project. We are actually going to tender for services such as legals, accounting and a project manager. The tender documents are ready to go out now, so that is how close we are. When the project is finished, shareholders and council will get their money back plus a return on investment. Then we hope that that money gets reinvested, and then we can build another two houses and then keep going on from there if there is still demand, which I think there will be.

The CHAIR: Christine, how many investors?

Christine PLANT: Well, we have not got that far yet. We are getting an investment prospectus done. Shane is doing that. He might be able to tell you a bit more about that. We are looking for private investors at the moment. We have got some advertising out. One of the problems that we are going to have with the project is that because it is a syndicate there are extra costs, such as legal requirements, compared to just one private investor. We have got extra requirements for legal and accounting requirements, ASIC fees, extra land tax and

that sort of thing. Those costs do not actually add anything to the project, but we have still got to pay them. We are looking for another partner, so our question is: would the state government consider becoming a partner with council and the community and tip in a few dollars to help pay for these extra costs that we are going to have to pay to make it a three-way partnership?

The CHAIR: Christine, great question. Because this is a parliamentary committee, it is not a government committee, can I strongly suggest you get in contact with Minister Harriet Shing's office, and if you would like any assistance with making connection with Minister Shing I am happy to support that. That is certainly a decision of government, not of this committee, but I am happy to provide any support to you in organising some communication with the minister's office.

Christine PLANT: Thank you. It does not hurt to ask, does it?

The CHAIR: If you do not ask, you do not get.

Shane GRAHAM: I am Shane Graham. Nice to meet you all. Just to reiterate what Chris said, we are looking at no more than about 10 investors in this one. Say if they put in about \$100,000-odd or \$115,000 each, the actual unit trust then has no debt. Debt is a cost, so if there is no debt, obviously there is a better commercial return to investors. Investors will not put in money unless there is a commercial return, so that is how we are basing it. We are not looking to do favours, but definitely with 75-plus new workers coming into our region from the mining at Goschen, we have got to put them somewhere, so we are looking to hopefully get them to recycle some of the funds through royalties, maybe. The state government, we can speak to them about that, to your Minister Shing, to help us with the front-end costs.

The CHAIR: Terrific. Marty.

Martin CAMERON: Thank you. This might be a question to either Stuart or Scott. Just touching on that workforce accommodation, we have heard as we have travelled around that there are a lot of issues with housing workforce and especially by the sound of it housing new workforce into the future up and around Swan Hill. I was listening before to you, Stuart, talk about how nurses and so forth are in the motels and staying there. Obviously, that puts pressure on if there are events in Swan Hill for people outside the area to actually come and stay in that motel accommodation situation. You said you have got some funding to do some builds. How far short do you think the accommodation you are going to build is going to leave you, in numbers? What is the total build that you think you will need moving forward to house these workers that are going to come in? In saying that, if they are coming in for a little bit of time, what is the infrastructure of Swan Hill? Will it be able to accommodate if they are bringing family, with schools, preschools, day care and all that type of stuff? I think either Stuart or Scott might be the best one to answer that, maybe.

Stuart KING: I will give a bit of a high level, and then Scott can talk more probably about the numbers. The hospital workers example that I gave is a live one. It is anything up to 60 people being accommodated per night in alternative accommodation. You are adding to that where we have a shortage of childcare workers, we have got a lot of agricultural workers, schoolteachers – the list goes on and on and on. I am sure that is something you have heard everywhere. I will let Scott talk more about the numbers.

I guess the other thing that is somewhat unfamiliar in a place like Swan Hill is the mixed style of housing development like you were talking about, because it is not a one size fits all. As we have evolved as a country town – country city – most of the housing that has been built is your traditional two- or three-bedroom, one- or two-bathroom type of accommodation with a few infill townhouse- or unit-type developments, but we really need to evolve into some higher-density, medium-density, multistorey-type townhouse accommodation, which is what we are proposing on this strategic site that we have acquired close to the CBD. But obviously that comes with additional costs, because doing those types of developments is not something that builders and developers in our region are used to doing. It really requires a bit of a kickstart to enable us to attract a big developer or a big builder to undertake those projects. I will hand over to Scott to finish that off.

Scott BARBER: Thanks for the question, committee members. Between 2021 and now we have had an increase of 900-plus jobs in the municipality. A lot of them are around agriculture and agribusiness, but we have also found, surveying our businesses, that they have been increasing jobs in industry and manufacturing. One of the pieces of feedback we received from our businesses is what is holding their business back and what is throttling their business is a lack of housing. The last time I checked, across the whole municipality, which is

about 22,000 people, there were seven rentals available. So we have got a fair housing shortage, to answer your question, but we are doing as much as we can to proactively get on top of that. We have talked about the work we are currently doing. We think there are a lot more opportunities to do a lot more, and Housing Action is one example, but I think I will talk to my topic today, which is about surplus government land, if I may. Is that okay?

The CHAIR: Yes. That would be really good.

Scott BARBER: Okay. What we have found, and we have been advocating really hard for the last two years, is there is surplus government land right across the municipality. I will go through it. I will try not to overwhelm you with a lot of numbers but give you a sense that we believe there are opportunities.

At Robinvale, for example, there are 14 Department of Education homes which are dilapidated and are not used. They were originally there to help attract teachers to Robinvale. Now, I have had a look at these homes, and some of them I do not think I would let my pet live in. They are in a very ordinary state. So we have been trying to talk to the department, using our example where we built those eight homes at Robinvale, 'Hey, we can help you do something here. These are big blocks with big old four-bedroom houses, which most people don't want in this day and age. Let's redevelop those and put units in there or smaller houses or do it differently and have them modern, have them nice, neat, tidy and low maintenance.' What we have got at the moment are people driving from Mildura to Robinvale, an hour each way each day, to teach, and for some reason we cannot keep teachers at Robinvale. I wonder why that is? So we believe that is a real opportunity. There is a lot of land there, and we could turn that into a lot of homes.

The second place I want to talk about is the Crown land near the racecourse in Swan Hill, across the road from the police station. The committee of management have talked with us. They do not need all of that land, and there is a great chunk of land there that is underutilised. It has weeds growing on it, it is not looked after and it could be used differently. We are lucky. We live in an area in our municipality where we have got lots of open spaces, we have got lots of Crown land, we have got river frontage – it is beautiful – but there is land away from the river which does not really suit a purpose, and that is something where I think we could partner with the state government to turn that into something which will become housing. You have seen, listening to Christine, listening to Shane and listening to Stuart, we have got a will and a way to turn that into housing as well. That is the second example.

The third example is the vacant land at the old police station site up at Robinvale. They would like to do something there. We think we can help. The fourth example is the closed public school at Ultima. That only closed in the last couple of years. Stuart, have I got that right? Yes, in the last couple of years. It is sitting there. We can do something with it. The final example I want to share today is this: VicRoads land which used to be the new bridge alignment from New South Wales to Victoria – from Murray Downs to Swan Hill. That land is no longer on the alignment options which are being looked at today. That is riverfront land. That is something that can be used, can be sold.

What we have sensed in talking to different departments about these blocks of land and lots of land is that the state government has a will to do something with surplus land, but you get into the departments and, I will be honest, it is all too hard. They do not know what to do with it. They do not really want to engage with it. Some people give me the sense that they do not want to lose the value of that land from the balance sheet, from their assets. But to be frank, these are big, lazy assets that are not doing anything – so they are not assets; they are just sitting there.

The CHAIR: Sorry, Scott, I am just trying to make some notes about the education staff. Where did you say that old public school is?

Scott BARBER: Ultima, U-L-T-I-M-A.

The CHAIR: Great. Thank you.

Scott BARBER: That is going to be near the VHM Goschen rare earths and mineral sands mine, which is something that I will get onto in a moment, and I will try to keep it concise. I guess I want to give you the sense that there is a lot of this surplus land which we think can be used and help us with the challenges. Now, I have talked about the 900 or so new jobs that appeared since 2021. That is not counting the mineral sands mine at

Goschen, which has been given the go-ahead. It now has a mining licence. They are wanting to house at least 75 people – to start with – very, very soon, and we are talking with them and others to see what we can do to help with that challenge. And across the river, which is Murray Downs in New South Wales, we are actually servicing Murray Downs, Moulamein – Euston is being serviced by Robinvale. We are actually servicing New South Wales and our local area, so we just need that to be taken into account. Murray Downs now has a new almond-processing plant, which has 90 employees; they all want to live at Swan Hill as well. I guess I am trying to get across to you that, yes, there are some big numbers – we are talking in the hundreds, to answer your question. We have also got a plan to get in tens of homes, but we want to turn that into hundreds of homes. We have set ourselves a target of 500 – we want 500 new homes in the next five years – and council's role in that is obviously making the land available and making it accessible for developers to work on it. The challenge for developers is they are finding rural areas expensive to develop. We are further from the cities, there is less competition and you have got to cart the materials further. I know Shane and Christine are all over that, but that is something that we would like to partner with the state government on, because we believe \$1 million or \$15 million or a sum of money that is spent in our area will produce a lot more homes and a lot more benefit than being used in the city, where it will be a blip. For us, it will actually go a long way. You can see and I hope you can sense from this group that we can make these things happen. I hope I answered your question. It was a long way round.

Martin CAMERON: No, good. Thank you.

Daniela DE MARTINO: It is Daniela De Martino here. Thanks, everyone, for coming along. It is so helpful. We have heard about some land lease models. Would you be interested in land lease when it comes to Victorian state government or Crown land, or are you wanting to purchase the land to build assets upon it?

Scott BARBER: Look, I think the first step is to have that conversation. I think council and Housing Action are open to different options. But right now we are knocking on doors, and we have not even set foot through a door. It could be a lease option or it could be a partnership option, similar to what Shane and Christine have set up, where we all go in it together and then we look at selling it or leasing it so revenue goes back to the state or back to the department, whatever is appropriate. But right now we cannot even start that conversation. If it is a land lease model, we would have to look at the viability and make sure it stacks up. And that is where I might hand back to Shane, if that is okay. That is where Shane and Christine have looked at different models in Housing Action. You can make nearly anything work, but we have we have got to understand the context.

Daniela DE MARTINO: Thank you.

Shane GRAHAM: Yes, correct. So just to carry that on a bit further, once again if it does not stack up commercially, it is not worth doing. That is why having the land effectively contributed by the council in favour of the units in that unit trust – there is no cash contribution, it is a land contribution. We go and raise the cash for investors. They are smaller investors; it is not a massive amount of money we are asking for. We spread that risk over number of investors, no more than 20. We are not doing this socially. That is a completely different ball game. This is for key workers. Someone can come and look at our house, they can go, 'Yep, that suits us, and we'll buy it at market rate.' There is a market return for the all the investors, which includes the council in that. At the back of that there are two more ratepayers that have come in. That land is now being used. I think the lease model, yes, of course it can work, but we have got to walk before we can run. We need to show that this model works locally to be able to then get other people wanting to do the same thing with us in the future, because the next one might be four houses; we do not know at this point in time.

The fact is there is land out there that is in fantastic spots close to the CBDs of these regional areas – that is where people want to live. It is a pleasure to be able to work in a regional area and go home for lunch. My house is 3 minutes away – you cannot do that in Melbourne. That is why people come to our region. We can knock off at 5:30 and be at the river, sitting there having a picnic at 5:45. That is why people come to our region. So yes, we do not have the infrastructure, but what Scott is saying is if you put \$1 million or \$5 million into a regional area, the return on investment for the state government is way higher than what it would be in a metropolitan area. You can see that. I think it is even more so than the Goldfields or Mornington or anything like that, because we just do not have as much infrastructure as you guys. So more bang for your buck is a big tick. We are going to use assets that are dilapidated – that is another big tick. I do not care if they are leased. I will do a 99-year lease. I have done that before, no problem at all. You know, the money goes back, whatever, it stacks up. These options can all be looked at, if we actually have the options. At the moment we do not.

Martha HAYLETT: Thank you, Shane. It is Martha Haylett here, Member for Ripon. Thank you for that, Scott and Shane. We have heard that so much, that in so many other areas of regional Victoria and rural Victoria there is all this underutilised state land, basically. Our inquiry will definitely be looking at that and making some recommendations, hopefully, on that. I am just wanting to ask something sort of similar around infrastructure and enabling infrastructure. I have got towns like Ararat, Maryborough, Beaufort and St Arnaud, where that is a really big issue as well. We do not have sewerage in a lot of towns, and obviously across your municipality you are covering a lot of really itty-bitty places as well. Maybe this is a question for Scott and Michelle about enabling infrastructure and what they want to see in that space. Regional Development Victoria have done some really small pilot projects. Do you want to speak about your experience with that, or the lack of enabling infrastructure, in your neck of the woods?

Scott BARBER: We will start with the Mayor if that is okay.

Martha HAYLETT: Sure. Go for it, Stuart.

Stuart KING: I am not Scott or Michelle, but I am happy to start with that one.

Martha HAYLETT: Go for it, Mr Mayor.

Stuart KING: You are absolutely right. Enabling infrastructure is so important, and that is one of those big expenses that both Scott and Shane have talked about, particularly in regional towns and even in cities like Swan Hill. But then if you go out to some of our smaller satellite towns like Worrinen, Nyah, Nyah West, Piangil and those sorts of places where they do not have mains sewer, for example – you know, town water supplies are pretty ordinary – the enabling infrastructure there, the basics, would make a huge difference, particularly from that agricultural worker accommodation perspective and for people looking for cheaper housing. They are the sorts of places that could really boost with enabling infrastructure. But even in the bigger places – Swan Hill and Robinvale, for example, in our municipality – developing that is extremely expensive. If you want to tack on a new estate, typically it is getting further out of town, and one of the barriers then is the connection of things like drainage, for example – drainage and sewerage in particular – back into the mains infrastructure. Those costs are huge, and essentially they get passed on to the consumer. So instead of a block of land realistically going for maybe \$100,000 or \$150,000, it might be \$200,000 or \$250,000 because you are making a contribution to the extension of that main trunk infrastructure to get there. So we think a direct fund to councils to assist with these sorts of infrastructure costs – similar I guess to the Big Build which has been rolled out in other places – would actually help us to expand, and it would actually enable growth in our municipality.

I guess the other thing as well is we have got, as Scott touched on, Murray Downs, which is across the river, which we like to call East Swan Hill, but New South Wales are sticking with Murray Downs for now. Our water corporation here is Lower Murray Water. They are looking at a project at the moment for their strategic direction, which will bring some of their smaller services together potentially into a couple of large super sites. We have been actively speaking with them. We are looking at opportunities for a Victorian water corporation to be able to help Murray Downs grow, because they do not have the water and sewerage infrastructure over there at the moment. So either they build it and invest in it over there or we do it on our side of the river. If we can help them grow, that helps us grow, and given that Lower Murray Water is a Victorian government corporation, then the revenue would be coming back into Victoria, which I think you would all agree would be a good news story for Victoria at the moment.

But yes, we are one of those cross-border communities I suppose that has not really fully grown. We are not an Echuca–Moama, for example. Murray Downs is still quite small. However, we actively work with Murray River Council. We see Murray Downs as being part of the solution as well, so we want to look at those opportunities. But certainly investment into core backbone infrastructure – drainage, water, sewerage and roads – that enabling infrastructure, will absolutely help our cities and our towns to grow.

Martha HAYLETT: That is a good point, Stuart, that it could just be a direct fund to council to then do that work. That is a really good point.

Stuart KING: I think it is a point we make regularly, even as we speak with, for example, mining developments, as Scott touched on, or renewables developments and those sorts of things, and they talk about community benefit funds and community benefit sharing and stuff like that. We actively say to them when they come and present to us that we want those funds to be done through local government, through council,

because we are the ones closest to our communities, we know the needs of our communities, and the last thing we want when it comes to community benefit sharing, for example, is to have one footy club fighting against a tennis club or a bowls club or another community group, fighting over the scraps of funding that is coming out of some sort of community benefit sharing model. If we can get that as a direct fund to council, in the same way as when it comes to infrastructure, we can do a hell of a lot more with it than just throwing out scraps to everybody that is putting their hand up.

Jordan CRUGNALE: Good point.

Michelle GRAINGER: Could I just add from our small-town perspective, please: the state government already has runs on the board and has done great projects with small town sewerage schemes. We would be saying, 'Why can't we reintroduce those sorts of schemes?' They were all happening when housing was not at a crisis level. They were a great success. They limited costs for landowners to reconnect to about \$800. That would be fantastic in getting all our small towns more environmentally sustainable, because they would have reticulated services and that would allow them to grow, because at the moment there is a lot of land that is just set aside for wastewater treatment that could be used for housing.

The CHAIR: Michelle, could you just give us a bit more detail about how those schemes worked?

Michelle GRAINGER: It was a state government system – they selected towns. I have worked in other municipalities where Peterborough and Terang got access to those services. It was a program where local government was a stakeholder, but it was largely the water authorities running them. The state government gave the commitment for landowners to sign on that their cost would be reduced, so that they got buy-in and the system could actually work. It was a great infrastructure upgrade.

The CHAIR: Terrific. That is great.

Jordan CRUGNALE: I have got questions around seasonal workforce and retention. My area is in the Bass Coast – high tourism, health care. One of our health services that rents 28 properties also takes up motels for visiting nurses and specialists. Also, there is an abattoir, tourism, hospitality and a lot of them are actually renting places. My health service was successful also in the Regional Worker Accommodation Fund to build a hotel-style development onsite. I am keen to hear more about what kind of housing provision there is currently for the seasonal workforce. Obviously you mentioned the health one with the hotel, but also are there any others? Where are your seasonal workers living at the minute?

Stuart KING: Yes, it is a really good question. I guess from our perspective as well, 'seasonal workers' is probably not really accurate anymore, because seasonal workers have turned into permanent workers. Most of our ag workforce in some way, shape or form are not just here for a harvest season, for example – the work is ongoing. To be blatantly honest, a lot of them are living in inappropriate accommodation – eight, 10 people jammed into small houses; people living in backyard sheds, the old-fashioned dongas, that sort of stuff. That is not a great look, and that is certainly not something that we promote, but that actually is the reality. On a more positive note, a lot of that ag workforce is accommodated on farm in farm worker accommodation which obviously is still that sort of small, individual room-style accommodation, but most of that has been built in the last few years, so it is up to current standards – it is modern, it is fit for purpose. As a municipality we have approved a number of those – Michelle would have the stats – including some quite large ones in my time in the last 4½ years on council. That is where that sort of seasonal ag accommodation is, but there is some pretty inappropriate accommodation out there. It is not something we are proud of. It is something we are aware of. It is very difficult to police from a local government level, but we do our best in that area. We absolutely need more accommodation in that.

One of the other things in terms of workforce as well is we have recently found out that our local abattoir is looking at a significant expansion, which could also mean an additional 200 jobs in the local abattoir. Then again, a lot of that is overseas workers that come to do those jobs, and unfortunately, they are probably the most vulnerable when they find themselves in the most inappropriate styles of accommodation. I do not know if there is something you want to add to that, Scott?

Scott BARBER: No. I think, Stuart, you have covered it. We are looking to improve. We are getting applications coming in. We know that the regulations around seasonal worker accommodation have changed in recent years, and we are working through that. Back to your point, committee member – I am sorry –

Jordan CRUGNALE: Jordan.

Scott BARBER: Jordan, we have had the same challenges with the hospital using up tourist accommodation, and Stuart touched on it earlier. If we can get our strategic land project off the ground for the hospital, that will help them with a third of their accommodation challenges right now, so that will be good for everybody. Michelle, did you have anything you wanted to add to that?

Michelle GRAINGER: I am happy to provide you with some statistics on what we have approved for rural worker accommodation and what we believe we have got in train to give you some data around that.

Jordan CRUGNALE: That would be great. Thanks, Michelle.

Wayne FARNHAM: I will have a go. Hello, everyone.

The CHAIR: You might want to introduce yourself. They cannot see us very well.

Wayne FARNHAM: It is Wayne Farnham, the Member for Narracan. I just wanted to talk about the government housing targets that were set statewide and how that affects your LGA. We have also heard some commentary even today on the 70–30 split from greenfield back to brownfield. How is that working within Swan Hill, and is it achievable?

Scott BARBER: I will take that in the first instance. Yes, it is achievable. The draft housing target, which I think was about 1500 homes, was significantly less than what we are seeing going up in the municipality. The new target, 2100 homes – that is still less than what we are actually delivering. So we are not really too worried about the target. We are actually aiming to be more ambitious than that, Wayne. When it comes to the greenfield–brownfield split, we have not really let that worry us too much because the land available is what we have. We are looking at increasing density where possible in some of the brownfield areas, and that is going to housing diversity. We recognise that the days gone by of a three-bedroom home being where you start and that should be your investment – no, we need a range of products on our market, and Shane and Christine understand that as well as I do. We will keep working on that. We have a number of developments now where they are getting into units, and that would be working towards the brownfield percentage. But we have not been too worried about it. We have got significant general res available; we just need to be able to put houses up on it.

Wayne FARNHAM: Scott, just on that topic that you brought up then – getting a bit more diverse housing into the market – are you actually saying to developers, ‘Hey, listen, we want X amount of two-bedders, X amount of three-bedders’? How are you going to monitor that or encourage that?

Scott BARBER: The market is doing it itself, Wayne, so it is probably more of a comment or an observation that we are seeing that that is going to give more return on investment than going to the old style of it has got to be a standalone home and that is the only thing you look at. These places are going as quickly as they are going up. It is just amazing. As I said earlier, the last time I checked there were only seven rentals available across the municipality. A lot of the planning applications coming in now are for units or higher density accommodation, and they are going as quickly as they are constructed.

Wayne FARNHAM: And my assumption would be that you are focusing that on your brownfield sections, not on greenfield sites?

Scott BARBER: Correct.

Michelle GRAINGER: If I could just add to that if I may, council have recognised that our development industry still needs to mature, and we are trying to speed up the turnaround time for planning applications. In order to do that we have devised a development advisory service. We know that we are not getting the quality of application that we should be getting, and getting further information is significantly slowing and adding costs to projects. So we are now offering people who want to build more than two houses access to a service where they can get 4 hours or \$1000 worth of advice from an architect, engineer, housing specialist or designer to actually improve their program and facilitate the applications going through a lot more quickly.

Wayne FARNHAM: Michelle, do you give them an opportunity to sit down with your town planners there and go through a pre town planning application, saying that you need to do A, B, C, D, E, F, G?

Michelle GRAINGER: Yes, and this is an add-on to that ask. We sit down and do it, and then we will say to them, 'Look, we reckon the biggest challenge for your site is design.' Or it might be drainage because it is so flat: 'Here's some access to services.' We understand that we are a regulator, so how do you become a regulator and a facilitator? This is the approach we have trialled for the last year, and it is starting to deliver some benefits. We soft-launched it, and we will probably launch it in a different way this year coming up.

Wayne FARNHAM: Thank you.

Stuart KING: If I can just quickly jump in, the other piece of work that the housing action group did that Shane and Christine are part of as well out of the housing summit was a needs analysis, so actually actively talking to employers in our region: 'What are your needs? How many rooms do you need, and what style of accommodation is required?' That is another piece of work that is being done by this community of volunteers.

Wayne FARNHAM: Thanks very much.

The CHAIR: Gee, time flies when you are having good conversations. I am just going to share something that the Member for Monbulk just said to me: 'They're very forward thinking and innovative in Swan Hill.' It was really interesting to hear what is happening up in the north-west and the great work that you are doing. It sounds really interesting. It sounds like exciting times ahead for your municipality. Christine and Shane, I have texted the minister's office and asked, 'Can we get on to this?' I will find out, or perhaps you could email me – Juliana Addison at Parliament. I am pretty easy to find. There are not many Julianas in the Victorian Parliament. I think I am the only one. But I have put in that request, and if I can facilitate and support you with Minister Shing's office, I put my hand on my heart and say that I am happy to do that.

If there is any further information that you would like to provide the committee or information that you did not feel that you had time to share, please reach out to our secretariat. We look forward to tabling our report at the end of the year and certainly forwarding copies or links to you so you can keep on top of what our recommendations and findings were. Thank you very much, and enjoy the beautiful time up in Swan Hill.

Witnesses withdrew.