

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Tackling Climate Change in Victorian Communities

Melbourne—Wednesday, 4 December 2019

MEMBERS

Mr Darren Cheeseman—Chair

Mr David Morris—Deputy Chair

Mr Will Fowles

Ms Danielle Green

Mr Paul Hamer

Mr Tim McCurdy

Mr Tim Smith

WITNESSES

Mr David Meiklejohn, Executive Officer, Northern Alliance for Greenhouse Action; and

Ms Michaela Skett, Environmentally Sustainable Development Unit Manager, City of Moreland.

The CHAIR: Welcome to the public hearing. I just want to 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 that you give; however, it is important to remember that parliamentary privilege does not apply to comments made outside of the hearing, even if you are restating what you have said during the hearing. You will receive a draft transcript of your evidence in the next week or so for you to check and to 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. Could each of you please state your full name and your titles before beginning your presentation.

Mr MEIKLEJOHN: Thank you. I am David Meiklejohn, and I am the Executive Officer for the Northern Alliance for Greenhouse Action.

Ms SKETT: I am Michaela Skett, the Acting Unit Manager for Sustainable Communities at the City of Moreland.

The CHAIR: Fantastic. Over to you.

Mr MEIKLEJOHN: We are going to do a bit of a double act today for a little bit of it. I would like to thank you first for the opportunity to be able to speak today. Thank you for inviting us. I am not going to recite in detail our submission; rather, I thought I would highlight some key issues and themes.

Together the nine councils that make up NAGA, the Northern Alliance for Greenhouse Action, cover a population of about 1.1 million people, and we stretch from the Melbourne CBD out to the growth areas. We have some of the most innovative and progressive councils that are seeking solutions to climate change, whether through mitigation or adaptation. We recognise, like major cities the world over, that we have a role to play to mitigate those impacts and reduce our emissions, both corporate emissions and those from our communities. I will be taking you through a broad overview of what communities in the NAGA region have been doing to respond to climate change, Michaela is going to provide a more in-depth view of what that looks like on the ground and I will wrap up with an outline of what we believe the Victorian Government can do more of to assist our councils and their communities in their efforts.

Our councils recognise that climate change does not stop at their individual municipal boundaries and that by working together across the region, but also increasingly beyond our boundaries, we can create change on the scale sufficient to meet the challenges posed by climate change. This has been demonstrated most recently by local governments exploring and developing power purchase agreements, or PPAs, on a scale unseen anywhere else in Australia. It started with the Melbourne Renewable Energy Project, or MREP, which brought together four councils, including Moreland, public institutions and private companies to purchase 88 gigawatt hours per year of newly built renewable energy from the Crowlands wind farm in the state's west, and I am sure you will hear more about that project from the City of Melbourne when they present.

NAGA has subsequently worked with other greenhouse alliances across Victoria to develop a larger PPA involving 48 councils across the state. Together these councils have committed 250 gigawatt hours per year of their energy load to invest in renewables and, being led by the City of Darebin, we are currently working together to develop a tender to go out to market next year. It is the kind of project where we can learn from the actions of one or a few councils and share those lessons on a broader scale, and that is really typical of the work we do.

It can also be seen in the Solar Savers project, which was initially developed by the City of Darebin. This project used an existing tool that was available to councils, the raising of rates on properties, to provide

low-income home owners with access to rooftop solar. Home owners were able to install solar at no up-front cost and to pay it back through their rates at a rate that ensured that the energy cost savings they made always exceeded the amount they were paying back to council. In this way, the project not only allowed vulnerable households to reduce their energy costs and to feel more confident about doing things like running air conditioners during heatwaves—anecdotal evidence we gathered during the project had told us there were pensioners who were not running their air conditioners because they were concerned about the high energy costs that would be happening—but it also opened up a new market for solar that had not been well-served by the general commercial sector previously.

NAGA has since been working with other greenhouse alliances to expand that program to other councils, both through a rates-based system as well as through a low-interest bank loan developed with Bank Australia. After an initial pilot supported by the State Government, we have now got nine councils testing versions of Solar Savers with their communities in the next two years. We are also the home of the climate emergency movement, which you have been no doubt hearing a fair bit about. The City of Darebin was the first council in the world to declare a climate emergency, and it has now been followed by 1000 jurisdictions worldwide, including 21 in Victoria, including the Shire of Mornington Peninsula; 76 in Australia; and most recently the European Parliament. The climate emergency movement is a good example of how local governments listen and react to and work with their local communities. It is not a movement which has been imposed top down by local governments; rather, it has emerged from the community demanding stronger action on climate change. It calls on local governments to develop more ambitious emissions reduction targets and to commit more resources. We recognise this is new territory for local governments, and we have been running a lot of workshops and providing background assistance to councils to help them understand what it means to declare a climate emergency and how we might come together to make it work.

An additional challenge that we face in terms of traditional climate governance, as practised by councils, has come in an increasing understanding of the risks associated with the impact of climate change on council assets and operations, as was raised with the previous speaker. We have addressed this, firstly, by raising awareness amongst key decision-makers—the CEOs, chief financial officers, risk managers and so on—of their legal liabilities associated with current and projected climate risks. We had a workshop just over a month ago with renowned climate risk expert Sarah Barker from MinterEllison, and we have since created a working group of risk managers to examine practical measures, such as casting a climate lens over their current risk audits to try and work out: what are they going to be liable for now and into the future? And that work is going to start early next year. Our councils are generally thinking much more ambitiously than previously about how they are going to play their part in reducing the contribution of themselves and their communities to the production of greenhouse gases as well as protecting their communities from the worst impacts of climate change.

So to give you a better idea of what this looks like within one particular municipality and the things that flow out of that, I would like to hand over to Michaela to speak about Moreland's experience.

Ms SKETT: Thanks, David. Moreland council is one of the councils acknowledging that we are in a state of climate emergency, and our adopted goal is to realise a zero carbon Moreland by 2040. Our goals and strategy and programs focus on three key areas: energy transition, sustainable transport, and waste and consumption. Council has been certified carbon neutral as an organisation since 2012, but our strategic framework and action plan for the community acknowledges that we will not achieve a zero carbon Moreland by 2040 without significant new partnerships with our community and also policy and legislative change at state and federal levels.

I thought I would just highlight three areas where Moreland council is working to provide leadership and demonstrating a willingness to invest in innovation to accelerate that transition to zero carbon. One area is in the planning policy space, which was talked about by Natasha, in the context of the climate crisis. Moreland is seeking to lead another step change in how the ESD standards are reflected in local policy and at the state level. We are in the early stages of that as a collaborative effort with CASBE and other interested councils to work to develop essentially a version 2 of the local ESD policy that would progress us towards the outcome of zero carbon buildings in the planning scheme. The policy obviously will be pushing key strategies, including energy efficiency, fuel switching from gas to electricity and smart onsite energy generation. It will aim to complement

efforts by the Australian Sustainable Built Environment Council and others to establish a pathway to zero carbon in the National Construction Code.

The building sector currently accounts for around 20 per cent of Australia's greenhouse gas emissions, and our research is suggesting that there is potential to reduce buildings-related emissions by up to 70 per cent on 2005 levels by 2030. Current and proposed policies in Australia will not get us anywhere near that potential. Ultimately, though, collaborating councils and our communities—for us to realise the benefits of more ambitious ESD and planning, we do require the planning Minister's approval, and most councils would need support with proactive enforcement to make sure that it actually is realised on the ground.

Mr FOWLES: When you say support, do you have any specific views about what that might—

Ms SKETT: Funding, resourcing, capacity building—yes.

Mr FOWLES: Really?

Ms SKETT: Yes.

The CHAIR: You might have heard some of the evidence earlier. Is there a way in which there can be a cost reduction through having efficient regulation which might free up the capacity not only for the home owner but also for the council to be working in a space which both addresses housing affordability and having climate-friendly buildings and climate-friendly communities? Is there a way we can potentially regulate differently or more efficiently to achieve that freeing up of capacity?

Ms SKETT: I am sure there is. I would not be a more expert respondent to that question than Natasha. I guess from an enforcement perspective at Moreland we are one of the first councils to try to do more work in that proactive enforcement space. It is really a process of working to build the capacity of the enforcement officers that may not have those ESD skills—to build that up and get them being able to take a broader view when they are doing the enforcement on planning. But yes, a lot of councils would not have a proactive enforcement team at all.

Another area where council is taking a leadership approach is with our integrated transport strategy and associated parking strategy. We have got a highly urbanised context and a strongly growing population, and we just cannot maintain city livability and amenity if that growing population brings with them the current levels of private car ownership into the city. As well as seeking to make the city more cycling and walking friendly, we are changing the way parking is provided and managed in our three key activity centres. Key measures include the introduction of new parking restrictions and the proposed removal, through a planning scheme amendment, of the minimum parking rates required in new developments within the activity centres. This approach is backed by world's best practice about what works to enable transport mode shift to more sustainable forms of transport, but it is somewhat controversial and challenging to implement with the local community. Council is demonstrating political leadership in its willingness to do what is necessary for the long term, if not universally popular in the short term. Again, though, the planning amendment to change the parking rates will require ministerial approval.

A third type of leadership activity that council continues to support and undertake in partnership with the Australian Energy Foundation and others is the development and delivery of energy innovation pilots. The pilots are trying to test and explore new approaches, technologies and business and financial models to try to overcome the many barriers to that rapid transition so that we are looking forward to a smart, decarbonised, decentralised and socially just energy system. One recent example of a pilot was the Solar for Renters pilot, for which we did receive grant funding support from DELWP. We have been very happy to see Solar Victoria's intention to extend solar subsidies to landlords and tenants. These kinds of pilots are often complex and resource intensive, so we definitely welcome and appreciate support from the State Government and different agencies towards that work—also because that helps us ensure that the pilots deliver learnings to the wider sector and, where suitable, get the support required to scale up if something is working.

I would just like to make a final point about the potential for local and state governments to work together with aligned universities and institutions on mobilising our communities. Many people in our community that are not in the social media bubble that we are in that are concerned about climate change are pretty unaware of the

extent and seriousness of the threats—economic, social and environmental—implicit in continuing with our business-as-usual approach. Many have noted that climate change is no longer a technology problem but a human and system problem. I really think it is our shared obligation to build that social and political momentum for the rapid transition to zero carbon as soon as possible. Most councils simply do not have adequate in-house skills and resources to undertake this communication and engagement task themselves with their community, so support from State Government and a collaborative approach—for example, through the expansion of the zero carbon transitions initiative being facilitated by Sustainability Victoria—would be really welcome. I will leave it there.

Mr MEIKLEJOHN: I would just like to conclude by identifying some ways we think the State Government could do more to assist councils. We start with the recognition that the Government has made remarkable progress in the last few years in developing new policy, implementing new programs, investing in renewables and creating a supportive legislative framework, such as the *Climate Change Act*. For example, as an idea—and this sort of goes to your point, Chair, about how you get over that wicked problem of affordability of homes as well as improving the energy efficiency of homes—the current version of the updated *Local Government Act*, which is working its way through Parliament, provides for the extension of environmental upgrade agreements, or EUAs, as a financing mechanism from commercial properties to include residential properties for the first time as well.

So this form of financing will support programs like, for example, Solar Savers, which I mentioned earlier, by allowing councils to provide finance for households wanting to invest in solar as well as energy efficiency without the debt necessarily sitting on the books of the council. They can act more as a pass-through agent. We know this has been seen as a barrier in the past by councils, so by passing this reform of the Act, local governments will be able to expand their operations. I think this is a way of addressing that issue of affordability through clever financing mechanisms that we are able to do to be able to make those sorts of things affordable. For councils like Moreland, for example, who have got ambitious targets I think to double the amount of rooftop solar within their municipality, such legislation is going to be vital.

We would also encourage the State Government to continue and go further in any of this work in partnership with local governments. Local government is often reactive to policy that is set at higher tiers of government, and while we participate in consultations run by the State Government we would also encourage the State to think about local government a little earlier and some of its decision-making processes. We recognise that there are sometimes political sensitivities that are associated with State Government programs or investments, but early engagement with local government, particularly where local government is going to be directly affected, would make for better program design.

With regard to policy development, we would encourage greater transparency where it is possible and avoiding the so-called ‘black hole syndrome’, where we are consulted on an issue and then it seems to disappear into a black hole for months, with limited ongoing communication. As an example of this, councils were involved in consultations on climate risk and the implications for the building and the planning system back in 2017. We are still waiting on the outcome of that consultation.

The work of Victorian councils is also dependent on actions taken by other stakeholders, such as electricity distributors and energy market regulators, and we would call on the State Government to use its weight in influencing those to move towards a more distributed renewable energy future. That includes also the potential of investing in upgraded infrastructure where necessary. We note, and I am sure you have heard this with increasing concern, reports of investment in renewables being delayed because of a lack of adequate connections to the grid, particularly in the north and west of the state where new renewables projects are being planned and developed.

You might notice I have not made a big request for a large financial investment in local government, so do not be nervous. That is not necessarily coming. While we believe there is a need for greater State Government investment to support local government efforts, we believe that by working together more closely in partnership that funding can be better directed and targeted. The traditional method of funds distribution, where State Government dangles the carrot out and gets councils to compete with each other for projects with a heavy emphasis on innovation, can work in some circumstances but can be detrimental in others. We would prefer

that the State and local governments work out joint long-term strategies and work out how these might be supported through more targeted funding.

Finally, as I mentioned, with regard to climate risk and with the climate emergency, we are entering a new governance space. We need the support of the Victorian Government with regard to both specific issues, such as identifying legal responsibilities that may sit within the state planning framework which may put councils and their staff at risk, as well as an understanding of how to govern.

Just to wrap up, while the actions that I and I am sure many others appearing before you have outlined are commendable, they are not enough. Local government can lead within its limited space, but it needs the State Government with its bigger available space to work with us. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. That was a very detailed presentation. I do have one question that immediately came to mind through the course of your presentation, which is: given that you have effectively stakeholders literally from the CBD of Melbourne right to the outskirts of Melbourne, transport is obviously a very large emitter of carbon—greenhouse gases. It occurs to me that at the moment the way that we have structured our cities is that we have a net migration of people in in the morning and then a net migration of people out in the afternoon, and I suspect that concept results in a much larger carbon footprint than if we had, at least to some extent, a decentralised city where we are using effectively in the morning redundant infrastructure going out and in the afternoon redundant infrastructure coming in. I am thinking trains and the like. Is it true that the way we have structured our cities—where you have got that kind of migration in and then migration out—is leading to a larger carbon footprint, particularly in the transport space? And should we be looking at, where we can, encouraging decentralisation so that we are using infrastructure more efficiently and creating employment hubs in the outer areas?

Mr MEIKLEJOHN: Yes, I guess with the caveat that NAGA is primarily focused on the built environment. I used to be a transport consultant, so I can answer a little bit with that cap on. But is there anything you wanted to add to that?

Ms SKETT: No.

Mr MEIKLEJOHN: I mean the State Government has done this to a degree in the past with the creation of activity centres—for example, like Box Hill—to look at this and try and move people. It is true that it is a contributing factor to transport emissions, but most cities in the world face this problem and most cities in the world have what we have, which is a spoke system of public transport provision to try and address that. That is certainly an issue. The other thing I think that cities also face is cross-city travel, where we do not have the public transport provision and that is unlikely to be ever met. Therefore we would probably want to look at other technological solutions, like electric vehicles, that are tied to renewable energy sources of production, such as solar on people's homes and people driving home and parking their EVs and so on. That is going to be a way of reducing emissions for that.

I think the third form of transport is that very localised transport. A lot of trips in Australia taken by car are under 2 kilometres, and they can more easily be replaced by walking and cycling. And the sort of work in local governments that Michaela was talking about, with the parking strategy through the Moreland integrated transport strategy, is the sort of approach you need to take to reclaim some of that space from vehicles and to open it up more for other people to be able to access urban space.

So there is not one answer. I think one of the dangers that we do face with the electric vehicles, if you are wanting to address that congestion issue and the efficiency of using assets, is this idea that, 'Well, once we have all switched over to Tesla weekend road trucks'—which I saw them start to advertise last week—'all our problems will be solved because we'll have covered the emissions side of things'. We will have covered the emissions side, but we will not have covered the congestion side.

Ms SKETT: I would just make one other point, I guess, in regard to the spoke-and-wheel kind of arrangement and the emissions related to that. Obviously for growing cities getting the public transport to be really super fast and efficient, with zero emissions potentially, would make a big difference. With the bus network we are trying to work towards what could be zero emissions buses operating to cover some of that

cross-city route, because we absolutely agree that just switching to renewables and relying on private vehicles is not going to be a good solution.

Mr HAMER: I have a question just about, I guess, the heat island effect, and it probably affects particularly Moreland and Darebin as well. There are a lot of fairly small properties, and there is not a lot of tree coverage to start with. When those properties are redeveloped into multi-unit developments or even if someone knocks it down and builds a new place, you often get an increase in the impervious area, which has other effects in terms of stormwater run-off and other things. So as a community—and you did not mention that in one of your three top priorities—what are you doing and maybe what are some of those inner councils doing? Obviously Melbourne has quite a strong strategy in terms of tree planting, but what, for example, is Moreland doing in that space?

Ms SKETT: Sure. Our original zero carbon strategy in 2014 had urban heat island as one of the key strategic directions. As a consequence of that we developed an urban heat island action plan for council, and as a consequence of that we have developed an urban forests strategy, which is resulting in targets. That strategy has a target around planting 5000 street and park trees a year to try and increase canopy cover. That is one of the initiatives, and the ESD policy does have some measures in there that support mitigation of the urban heat island effect. As well, it ties in to our WaterMap—our integrated water management strategies—where we are doing things in the public realm to try and introduce water into the landscape and capture stormwater and have wetlands and that sort of thing to have both the waterway health benefits but also the greening in the public realm. In the private realm it definitely is challenging with the churn. From a planning perspective, where we do have some control, we have got a current planning amendment. I am actually not 100 per cent sure where it is in the process, but it is looking to influence the landscaping in those planning applications in regard to the retention of existing trees where possible and the requirements of what is required to be planted after so that we are trying to encourage that and enforce, if we can, the planting of canopy trees rather than small shrubs that are not providing that cooling and the landscape amenity.

Mr HAMER: And is there enough space, particularly in certain suburbs? Because my knowledge of the area, particularly in the southern part of the municipality, is that the streets are pretty narrow. There might be a 1.5-metre footpath, which is generally asphalted. There would not seem to me to be an enormous capacity to put in any form of street trees, let alone canopy trees. Has there been enough space identified within the suburbs to do that? Or do most of the plantings have to come, say, along the boundaries, which is on the creek?

Ms SKETT: A combination, so it is definitely an ongoing challenge for our open space and parks teams to be finding suitable locations for the trees. Certainly as well in those more constrained spaces sometimes the cost of doing a decent tree planting, even if you can squeeze it in, can be more because you have to do work to get it so that it will thrive into the future. So there is a lot of work around species selection and that sort of thing. So definitely in those smaller streets at the southern end where it is more constrained, it is more difficult. In some cases you are hoping that there is more potential for canopy on private land as well because there is less opportunity in the street.

The CHAIR: I just want to pick up on that. As we increase the density in communities like Coburg or Brunswick, property prices have been going up. I am just wondering whether there is an opportunity—particularly with multistorey multidevelopments and particularly if they are 10 or 15 storeys in height—or maybe even a requirement for rooftop gardens spaces, which would provide amenity to those that live in the residence but would also have a potential general cooling effect on the broader community. Has Moreland looked at whether that is something that could be installed into developments, whether it has much of an impact on the cost of the development and whether it would generally feed into providing more shade and habitat and a generally cooler environment?

Ms SKETT: Yes, we have been doing some work collaboratively with the City of Yarra, and the City of Melbourne, I think, have been leading the work around green infrastructure and green roofs. So that is certainly work that has been looked at and it is something that we ask for when we are doing our ESD and planning—that is one of the opportunities that we would encourage and that developments can take on.

The CHAIR: Have they been? Is there any evidence of whether there is resistance or are developers looking at it and saying, ‘Actually, yes, I think that’s going to lead to me getting a better yield per square metre?’.

Ms SKETT: I could not say for all of them what the driving force is, but certainly we are seeing more rooftop gardens in some of our higher density developments. It is a bit of a lifestyle thing as well for some of these areas and a community space for the people living in the building.

The CHAIR: I mean, that could be a swimming pool too, couldn't it?

Ms SKETT: It could be.

Mr MEIKLEJOHN: It could be.

The CHAIR: Using captured water.

Mr MEIKLEJOHN: You are seeing it. Some developers are seeing it as a bit of a niche to be able to sell and to be able to say, 'We want to build a sense of community within these apartments and we build community gardens to help service that'. But we also get other developers who may be just in it simply for the money, which is fine too. I know some that live quite close to me in Brunswick in an eight-storey development and they have installed wires between the different buildings and grown vines up over them to provide shelter and to provide shade during summer. It is a really simple, easy solution and it makes it much more attractive for them when they are trying to sell it.

Mr FOWLES: Turning to adaptation, whether it is Moreland or other alliance members, to what extent do you think there is a good degree of preparedness and planning around public infrastructure that council funds for a changed climate, footpaths, kerbs and channels—all of those things that we will be dealing with, like high water volumes, more significant weather events and all of those other things as the economic life of these assets rolls off. Are they being replaced, do you think, with appropriately specced infrastructure that will cope with a changed climate?

Ms SKETT: I think we are nowhere near there yet, no. I think in that asset renewal space it is quite slow moving in a lot of ways, and councils are resource constrained. There is a lot of renewal that is still going on just to get things up to what would be a business-as-usual sort of standard of replacement. There is work that is being looked into, and I think there has been some work done by NAGA around what some of those risks and issues are, but it is certainly a big opportunity for innovation and collaboration with the engineering sector and the construction sector et cetera.

Mr FOWLES: Broadly speaking there would be, presumably, billions of dollars being spent each year by councils on this kind of public infrastructure. Do you get a sense that the decisions councils are making today are adapting in any way to climate change, to that type of investment?

Ms SKETT: It would depend on the council, but from Moreland's perspective we are certainly taking it on board. For example, if we are doing an urban redevelopment of a streetscape like Dawson Street that is reasonably high profile and has got a quite a lot of civic presence in Brunswick, when that was redeveloped and that streetscape was redeveloped, then we have installed these beautiful amenity-providing rain gardens that also provide stormwater management on the site. But in a sense they are still somewhat the exception rather than how we are in general rolling out streets across the whole municipality if we are doing resheeting and that sort of thing, because the impact of really redoing the way we do streetscapes to be water sensitive and all that sort of thing is a big change, and it would be very expensive. So it is a bit more about trying to prove the case and practice how to do it and what it looks like at this stage before being able to really understand the impact and implication of trying to do that more broadly.

Mr MEIKLEJOHN: You definitely are seeing it probably in the growth areas, like Whittlesea and Hume, for example, because you have got that opportunity to make it right the first time you are doing it. But for a lot of councils you are retrofitting 100- or 120-year-old pipes, for example, down streets. That is expensive to dig up and do that kind of work and is highly disruptive. As Michaela said, you have got a different approach, but you have also got different approaches, for example, with things like community buildings. Councils provide a lot of community buildings. Again, in the growth areas their issue is more around keeping up with population growth but it is definitely with an eye to adapting to how those buildings are going to perform in the future with the forecast of temperatures and so on. In the inner city you have got existing buildings which, again, might be

gold rush-era libraries, for example, and you are trying to look at whether these are going to work as well in their current state into the future.

Ms SKETT: Another point I would just make about flooding or extreme rainfall events is that the solution is not necessarily bigger pipes, because from a stormwater health perspective and a stormwater management perspective those flows to the waterways are damaging. You will never make pipes big enough to take those big, extreme events, so it is about how you manage your overland flow as well and how—

The CHAIR: That could be done practically, couldn't it, in terms of putting rainwater tanks on properties in that immediate area that is getting flooded or wherever the catchment might happen to be, which therefore is taking water out of the system as a sort of retention thing.

Mr MEIKLEJOHN: Yes.

Ms SKETT: That is right.

Mr MEIKLEJOHN: The City of Yarra has done this with a few of its parks. I know that they have those retention basins, and so when you get that overflow it just all settles in there.

The CHAIR: So you could do it as a retention basin or you could do it as rainwater tanks in the private properties within the area. It would act in the same way.

Ms SKETT: Yes.

Mr MEIKLEJOHN: Possibly. Yes.

Mr FOWLES: Hume and the others in their new estates—you would need a pretty granular set of assumptions to be able to go, 'The kerb width should be x per cent bigger than what we've done in the past'—how have they actually arrived at standards for these new estates?

Mr MEIKLEJOHN: It comes to an issue which Natasha touched on before in her presentation, which is that councils do that based on planning guidelines which are therefore based on the prior science of what has happened up until this point. The issue for councils going forward and for the planning scheme more generally is we are not doing it based on forecast science going forward. The biggest problem for councils is what we have been told from a legal liability issue, which is that it is not enough to be able to say, 'Well, we relied on this science that was based on the last 50 to 100 years and this is what happened', if in 20, 30 years time we allow a new development to go ahead in an area which turns into a flood plain and the science forecast it could turn into a flood plain. From what we were told by lawyers like MinterEllison the council will be liable for that. They need to know the science going forward, and that therefore needs to be updated and reflected in the planning amendments.

Mr FOWLES: Do you see a role for the State Government in that? Is that something that you—

Mr MEIKLEJOHN: Absolutely.

Mr FOWLES: How would you see us facilitating?

Mr MEIKLEJOHN: It is not only keeping up to date with the latest science—and we know the State Government has invested already in that to get that quite granular level down to, I think, a 5-kilometre area, but also to be able to therefore base future planning amendments or future planning schemes off that, to be able to take a cautious, conservative approach to this and to do that in a way which goes from not acting to acting and anticipating what that change might be in the future.

Mr MORRIS: I am just interested in the issue of offsets and the extent of the use of offsets, particularly with your member councils, and whether in getting to net zero corporate emissions they are actually utilising offsets or not. If so, how long is it going to take to get to a point where offsets are not required?

Mr MEIKLEJOHN: Yes, it is a hot topic. We have got some councils, like Banyule, that have set ambitious emissions reductions targets without offsets and that is quite rare. A lot of councils are doing what

they can in terms of signing up through the PPAs. If they are putting 100 per cent of their energy demand into a PPA, they are effectively saying, 'That's how we start to meet our emissions reductions'. That does not cover everything; it does not cover fleet, for example. But again a lot of our councils are now looking at how do we electrify our fleet, and we expect that that is going to be a key focus over the next four or five years.

The CHAIR: I might pick up on the offsets question. When you are looking at offsets, which I presume is mainly planting, there are, as you have indicated, opportunities within your own municipality. Depending on how dense that municipality is there may be more or less opportunities. Has your alliance looked at whether potential offsets could be used in neighbouring municipalities so that there is an opportunity to green up the outer suburbs, in which I suspect there are bigger opportunities? Have you looked at those sorts of things?

Ms SKETT: We are a council that is certified carbon neutral, including through the use of offsets for our residual emissions. We do the certification through the national carbon offset standard, so that is an Australian Government standard. Something like tree planting within our municipality or even in our neighbour's municipality is a carbon sequestration activity that we are doing, but it would not qualify to offset remaining carbon emissions under that standard. Councils and other organisations under that scheme would generally be buying gold standard certified offsets. They may be Australian, they may be plantings through, is it Greenfleet or those kinds of certified providers, but also they can be renewable energy projects overseas and that sort of thing. Yes, the offsets are being purchased as sort of gold standard certified international or national offsets.

I guess just to supplement what David was saying, for our council now that we are buying 100 per cent of our operational energy use, our remaining emissions that we need to offset are our liquid fuels, like our diesel and petrol that we are using for our vehicles—obviously we are trying to transition to a zero emissions fleet—and also the gas use that we are using in our buildings. Similarly, we are investigating what an accelerated phase-out of gas use looks like, how could that happen and what would be the feasibility and timing of something like that. Ultimately then we would not need to buy offsets.

The CHAIR: One last question: has your alliance—which is very diverse—looked at developing an urban forestry framework for that whole area? Is that something worth doing? Is that something that Parliament ought to be thinking about to create that momentum, really, for cooling our local communities?

Mr MEIKLEJOHN: The Resilient Melbourne project, which is based at the City of Melbourne, does that through an urban forest strategy, and so lot of our councils have really just been following that in terms of putting it into their own practices.

Ms SKETT: Absolutely. I am not sure about other councils and their financial capacity to be really taking up the challenge that that urban forest strategy for the whole metropolitan area lays out, but at the moment that is the framework that is there and that is being developed.

The CHAIR: It just occurs to me that is a way of creating a potential offset opportunity.

Ms SKETT: And multiple benefits on so many fronts in regards to—

Mr MEIKLEJOHN: The heat island effect and so on.

Ms SKETT: amenity and mental health and wellbeing et cetera.

The CHAIR: Would you like to make any concluding comments?

Mr MEIKLEJOHN: No, I think we have spoken enough.

Ms SKETT: Thanks for the opportunity.

Mr FOWLES: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you—very detailed. We appreciate it.

Witnesses withdrew.