

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2022 Flood Event in Victoria

Shepparton – Wednesday 13 September 2023

MEMBERS

Sonja Terpstra – Chair

David Ettershank – Deputy Chair

Ryan Batchelor

Melina Bath

Gaelle Broad

Wendy Lovell

Samantha Ratnam

Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell

Sheena Watt

PARTICIPATING MEMBERS

John Berger

Ann-Marie Hermans

Joe McCracken

Evan Mulholland

Rachel Payne

WITNESSES

Maria Brown-Shepherd, President, and

Sam Atukorala, Manager, Ethnic Council of Shepparton and District; and

Kate Steenvoorden, Co-Chief Executive Officer (*via videoconference*), Neighbourhood Collective Australia.

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

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

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

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

At this point I will take the opportunity to introduce myself, and committee members will introduce themselves to you as well. I am Sonja Terpstra. I am the Chair of the Environment and Planning Committee and a Member for North-Eastern Metropolitan Region.

Wendy LOVELL: Wendy Lovell, Member for Northern Victoria Region.

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

Samantha RATNAM: Good afternoon, and welcome. Samantha Ratnam, Member for Northern Metropolitan.

Melina BATH: Melina Bath, Member for Eastern Victoria Region.

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

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

The CHAIR: Thank you. With that, I will hand over to you to make your opening remarks. You will have about 10 minutes to make those remarks. I will give you a 2-minute warning as we approach the end of that time. If I could also ask those that are speaking if you could just state your name and the organisation you are appearing for for the Hansard record. Over to you.

Maria BROWN-SHEPHERD: My name is Maria Brown-Shepherd. I am President of the Ethnic Council of Shepparton and District. I am also a landowner, and my husband and I have got a property which is about 65 acres, on the border of the Moira shire and the Greater City of Shepparton. And after listening to some of the evidence, we were affected by the October floods. After the presentation of my co-chief and Sam, I can give some accounts of the floods that affected us. There is a need. I think it is relevant after listening to the other submissions –

The CHAIR: It is up to you how you use your time.

Sam ATUKORALA: I am Sam Atukorala, Manager of the Ethnic Council of Shepparton and District, and the opening remarks will be actually done by Kate Steenvoorden.

Kate STEENVOORDEN: Hi, everybody. My name is Kate Steenvoorden. Sorry I cannot be there in person today. I am the Co-Chief Executive Officer of Neighbourhood Collective Australia. We are based in Bendigo but work across the state and across Australia, so we work to kindle stronger resident-led communities where everybody belongs. We work particularly with multicultural communities but also partner in with not-for-profit organisations and government to strengthen communities. So we work around community development, training, consultation and also applied research. It is in that capacity that I am here today.

In June this year we undertook research and provided a written submission to the inquiry around the 2022 floods and how they affected multicultural communities. So as part of that research and submission, we spoke to multicultural or community leaders who had been supporting their communities during the floods. We spoke to multicultural organisations, including the Shepparton ethnic council, who you had with you in the room today. I also spoke directly to community members who had been affected by the floods.

As part of that research we found there were four key issues affecting multicultural communities during the floods, and that matched our research around other emergencies, including around COVID. We found a lot of similar findings. The first one was that our multicultural communities had quite different needs and different experiences compared to the mainstream community, so that was based on factors like being unfamiliar with the Australian landscape, having low English, low awareness of local hazards, having less connection to emergency services locally and understanding of where to reach out for information, and also past traumatic experiences. A number of people we spoke to, for example, had experiences of floods in their home countries, floods being quite catastrophic. Their understanding was that flooding did not happen in Australia, and that put them at that high risk, so we thought. So one of the findings was that people had quite different needs and experiences, and sometimes those experiences were quite difficult and quite dangerous experiences.

For example, some of those experiences were the evacuation orders not reaching people, so people being in houses that were flooding and the first they knew that their town or their region was flooding was when the water was actually in their own home – so complete lack of information and then not knowing where to reach out to. Also people driving through floodwaters, not knowing that that was dangerous and getting stuck. There was a father and daughter who were stuck, and it was only that someone was passing in a ute and was able to rescue them. So multicultural communities were affected in different ways and were quite significantly affected.

We also found that multicultural communities received information, when they did, in very different ways to the mainstream community. The ways that they predominantly received information were through community networks, not through emergency services or formal means, and they were not receiving information in English. So that was particularly for communities where there is overall a low level of English, but it was also for communities with higher levels of English where there was more trust in those community networks. Sorry, just let me go to my notes. We found that the response from emergency services was not always culturally responsive, so there was a mix of levels of cultural responsiveness and cultural knowledge among emergency services staff and volunteers. There were examples of people doorknocking in the feedback from multicultural community members. When they had someone knock on their door, whether that was a volunteer or a member of the defence force, they were surprised to find someone who did not speak English or had low levels of English, and they were not sure how to communicate, whether to get an interpreter or what to do when they encountered someone who had low levels of English. So there was mixed cultural knowledge and cultural responsiveness.

The final finding was that there were very different levels of preparedness in preparing for multicultural communities in the face of an emergency from region to region. So in some regions – and Shepparton was a region where there was existing preparedness for multicultural communities, the connections had been made. In Shepparton's emergency management plan there is reference to multicultural communities needing different methods of communication, but in most emergency plans that we reviewed there was no mention and there were no special measures that were referenced for getting information out to multicultural communities. So those were the findings.

We also made recommendations, but I might leave that for now because my 10 minutes is probably coming close to up.

The CHAIR: You have got about 3 minutes, if you want them. It is up to you.

Kate STEENVOORDEN: I will keep going then. We had five recommendations as part of that report. Those were: we recommend that all emergency management plans reflect the diverse needs of multicultural communities, so there should be work put into making those plans relevant for multicultural communities and their specific needs. We would like to see more and better engagement with multicultural communities prior to emergencies – so in that planning space, better engagement and community engagement. We would like to see more investment in multicultural community leaders. We found that they play a critical role during emergencies in getting information to their communities and keeping their communities safe, and we recommend more investment in training and support for those community leaders to do that volunteer role. And our last recommendation was to improve cultural responsiveness within emergency services, so looking again at training and capacity building around that cultural knowledge and particularly working with newly arrived communities, who we found to be at highest risk.

The CHAIR: Great. Thank you very much for that. With about a minute to spare – that is great. All right, we will go to questions now, unless either of you had anything you wanted to fit into the minute.

Maria BROWN-SHEPHERD: No.

The CHAIR: No? Okay, fantastic. A question, Ms Lovell.

Wendy LOVELL: Thanks. There has been a lot of talk about the need for better communication with our multicultural community during the floods, and it is a very difficult in an area where we speak well over 40 languages in this town and have a lot of new arrivals. Obviously when teams are doorknocking it is impossible for, say, 46 people to be on each doorknocking team in case somebody answers the door and does not speak English. I know that Hussam and I think La Trobe University have been doing a bit of a study into the need for more interpreters during emergencies in Greater Shepparton. How can we best get that message out to those communities, and what is the answer to this? How do we ensure that there is enough material available to them?

Sam ATUKORALA: I can answer that question. As Kate mentioned, we are actually talking about the most vulnerable multicultural communities here, pretty illiterate in English. As you said, there is a lot of diversity in this region. Also we have to understand the diversity within the diverse communities, because we have got a rich history from pre- and post-war migrant communities to new and emerging communities from refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds. We are talking about those communities actually coming as refugees and asylum seekers or under temporary protection or safe haven enterprise visas or bridging visa cohorts. These people might not have the best language skills, but what we have to do is, as Kate mentioned, invest in community leaders and we have to provide that support for them to educate their communities. Unfortunately we cannot actually take the interpreters; however, if we empower community leaders to educate community members, then if somebody comes to your door, if you do not speak the language, ring this person who can actually be the interpreter. So there would be an in-built strength within the community to actually support.

I know the Wise Well Women program did fantastic work during the floods in actually being that cultural link, and of course our organisation did that as well. That is what we can do to support these vulnerable communities. If there is someone they do not understand and there is a person on the other side who speaks the same language, they can be the interpreter for the emergency services worker. That is where it is really important that cultural sensitivity and cultural competencies actually are there for the emergency services workers. It is common sense, which language. If you can ask them, then of course they know which country or which language; they will be able to answer those two questions. Then perhaps if they have the connections with their peak council or other multicultural service providers, they can actually ring us and then we can find that particular person. Or if they can give us a bit of advice, we can say, 'We are planning to go to this region. Do you have any idea who is living in this region?' and we can actually better prepare them to have that access and also the connection.

Wendy LOVELL: I was going to say, most of the communities here, particularly the new settler communities, are fairly tight. They tend to know each other. So has there been any work or any thought put into

any work to set up some sort of database so that when there is an emergency an SMS can be sent in their own language either through the ethnic council or through their own community grouping?

Sam ATUKORALA: Yes. Those are the strengths that we have within this community. The ethnic council does not have a formal role, even though, say, 10 per cent of the population is from new and emerging communities. But if you look at the community as a whole, I think we have got 35 to 40 per cent from multicultural communities. So we do have bilingual workers at our organisation as well as at places like Uniting. Those community bilingual workers also hold community leader or community connector positions, so they do have these kind of WhatsApp groups or Viber groups. That is where they actually get the information.

Wendy LOVELL: Okay. So were those groups accessed by the ICC? Did they contact you to send out information to those groups?

Sam ATUKORALA: What ICC did was invite us to be there. That invitation was in the middle of the crisis, during the floods, so I was there to be that link. But also our whole organisation, even though we are a not-for-profit organisation funded to do specific programs, relocated our whole office to the emergency relief centre to provide that support for our multicultural communities. My predecessor actually made that decision. I have been in this job just a bit over 1½ months, so I was there at that time, looking after the staff. Also, whenever I was able, I went to ICC as well. Then we got that information and gave it to our bilingual workers and other community leaders that we were dealing with on a day-to-day basis to provide that detail.

Wendy LOVELL: Was the information provided prior to the flood to give them warnings and information about what was about to happen?

Sam ATUKORALA: Not necessarily, because information we are given by the departments is translated into multiple languages, but some of our community members are actually pretty illiterate in their own language. They can speak multiple languages because they are going from country to country through their journey to Australia, but they are not even literate in their own language. Therefore it is not necessarily making a big impact. Also, with the floods, it changes every couple of hours, so someone has to be there and provide that up-to-date information, because by the time we actually get someone to translate or interpret and then by the time the message is sent, the situation can be totally different and devastating as well.

The CHAIR: Right. We are going to have to move on. Ms Bath, a question.

Melina BATH: Thanks, Chair. Thank you for being –

Kate STEENVOORDEN: Sorry, can I just add to that a little bit? I just want to emphasise some of Sam's points. One is, Shepparton had better planning than a lot of regions in terms of multicultural communities before the flood, and some of those connections were there. But even in Shepparton the local ethnic council was only invited to the ICC several days into the floods, so even then there was a lag, and that was one of the better examples. And like Sam said, the information changes every few hours, so those community leaders were basically volunteering their time, and taking time off from paid roles often, to be at the ICC playing that very critical role. It is not so much text messages, it is WhatsApp that most communities use, and they are using voice messages, because as Sam says, not all communities are literate in their first language. It is a critical role, but people are playing that out of the goodness of their own hearts, often very newly arrived themselves with big financial commitments.

Melina BATH: Thanks, Chair. I have got two questions. I have got more, but just two quick questions, thank you very much – three. How many people were affected, were inundated through water, in your community approximately? Do you have any idea of how many homes may be affected – from, if I say, the ethnic council community?

Sam ATUKORALA: Unfortunately I will not be able to give the numbers, the reason being some of the vulnerable multicultural communities are housing in one house, like three or four families. Even for the census they will not give that information. When they see an authority or organisation, they will not provide that information unfortunately. But I can say that it is a large number of families, because we were at the emergency relief centre; we saw so many families come in to actually get the financial support from DFFH.

Melina BATH: Thank you. And that was going to be my next question. In terms of navigating grants, quite often a stressed, I will say, English language literate person – you know, a confident person – has reduced capacity when they have been stressed and kicked out of their home through water et cetera. How have you seen the navigation of grants, and what would you like to tell us about what is needed for a multicultural community in terms of their navigation of grants or support?

Sam ATUKORALA: Yes, that is a very, very good question. As I said, there are a number of families that are living in one house, especially the seasonal workers. Some of them are actually on a temporary protection or safe haven enterprise visa. Also, part of our community from North African communities do not have any valid visas as well. They do not want to go anywhere, but unfortunately they also get affected and they need support. If they are living in the same house, only one family will get the benefit. Also there were instances that were brought to our attention that some of the landowners, the landlords, claimed the funding that they were supposed to get; therefore they did not actually get any support. So what we have to do is – if they do know the geographical area, if they can prove it rather than depend on the visa status, so whatever they have to stay in this country legally. If they are affected, I think, without any means those multicultural communities should be supported.

Melina BATH: Okay. Thank you.

The CHAIR: We have to move on. Sorry, Melina. Dr Ratnam.

Melina BATH: That is all right. I will put it on notice.

Kate STEENVOORDEN: I think with that as well there were some changing criteria where some visa categories were not eligible and then they were eligible for certain grants. I think if we can, when emergencies happen, cast that net as widely as possible so that people on all temporary visas who are in our community and are affected are eligible from the beginning, because many people became eligible but there was such back and forth and advocacy of certain groups.

Samantha RATNAM: Firstly, thank you very much for your written submission, which was very comprehensive, and being here today as well. I think it highlights a number of the really big gaps in terms of our response to culturally diverse communities, which were highlighted, as you made the link, in the COVID response as well – different types of emergency situations or crisis situations but an interesting theme around the gaps, about who is involved around the table making decisions.

I want to focus on one particular point that you raised in your submission. You did not have a recommendation around this, but I would be interested in your thoughts. Firstly, it was also very heartbreaking to read your submission, just the accounts. Thank you for bringing the voices of the community through your submission. You got a real sense of the isolation and the distress people must have been experiencing. You talked about employers potentially not being as supportive of some of their employees in this disaster situation and a few points you made on point 5, which were: community members on temporary visas being evacuated from caravan accommodation to an unused factory with no showers, cooking facilities or heating, and they reported they were moved there rather than to an evacuation centre so their employer would not have reduced staffing during the floods; community members on temporary visas being asked to ignore road closures and continue working on farms and orchards, leading at times to being stranded in isolated areas when conditions changed suddenly; and community members returning to accommodation with mould, rising damp and unclean and unsanitary conditions due to lack of information, while some on temporary visas were directed back into unsafe accommodation by employers. Do you know about any work that is happening post this event now to hold those employers to account and make sure that employees have greater protection, should another disaster situation happen like this, so they are not exploited like that?

Kate STEENVOORDEN: No, I do not know of any work happening in that space. Obviously the people who provided that information did so in very strict confidentiality because of their vulnerability and their fears of losing their job if that information could be traced back to them, so a number of both community members and community leaders spoke to those examples that were provided in the report on the guarantee of anonymity. I do not know of any follow-up around those issues. But I would say that if there is another emergency the same things will happen at this stage, and probably particularly the PALM scheme workers are very vulnerable.

Sam ATUKORALA: Also, because of their vulnerability, they do not want to even approach us as an organisation because of their fear of actually getting deported. Also, the wages are very poor, and some people actually lost their job because they could not access it. That is the information that was given to our colleagues working at the emergency relief centre as well, because when they could not go to work, they did not have their job, so that is the reason why definitely this information is confidential, as Kate said. But they actually mentioned that because they could not go to work, they lost their job as well, and because there is no government support whatsoever, they actually became more vulnerable.

Samantha RATNAM: Of course. Thank you for bringing their accounts to public light and obviously observing that confidentiality and being sensitive to it. I think it is something that we will need to take up in terms of what we can do to protect those employees in future. I am happy to come back.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mrs Tyrrell.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: No, actually. Wendy asked the question I was going to ask earlier.

The CHAIR: Okay, no problem. Mrs Broad.

Gaëlle BROAD: Thank you. It has been very insightful. You talked about some of the challenges with doorknocking, and then in your submission you talked about some of these communities not accessing the emergency websites, local radio, newspapers, Facebook and that sort of thing. I am not sure if I read it before, but can WhatsApp interpret or something? Is there some technology that could help doorknockers in communicating directly with people that you are aware of that you could speak to? Are there any examples of technology that would help in these situations?

Sam ATUKORALA: I can actually answer. Kate, do you want me to?

Kate STEENVOORDEN: I will throw to you in a second, but I will just say all doorknockers – everybody – have access to phone interpreters in Australia. It takes only a matter of minutes to get an interpreter on the phone, so we advocate using a professional. If you need interpreting, you should be using a professional interpreter.

Sam ATUKORALA: Also, our community is really generous, and the community leaders take time out from their day jobs to actually support our communities during these emergencies time and time again during COVID and during the floods. It is just a matter of a phone call, and we are talking to a community leader. That is what they do. If they want to directly access services like the Ethnic Council of Shepparton and District or Uniting, we do provide settlement support, therefore they have direct connections with bilingual workers. Moving forward, what would we like to see exactly in a regional area like this? Floods, bushfires and things like that are actually going to be in-built within their lives. I know that we want people to actually get their citizenship, but when they do the citizenship test we never talk about those kinds of things with the citizenship, which are really, really crucial. As a regional area, providing that information and empowering them to have the skills and the knowledge before they settle in this area would be crucial. Also the ethnic council should have funding to have an ongoing position. We had an emergency management coordinator position during the floods. But the funding is finished, so that person is no longer there. But we need an ongoing person – it does not necessarily matter, as long as we at least get the funding from somewhere – or someone who is actually dedicated to multicultural communities within the council, which is crucial because they are one of the most vulnerable communities in this area.

Gaëlle BROAD: We need to disseminate that information out to the community leaders, by the sound of it, because they are so pivotal in all of this. I guess my second question, if I can ask one, is just to give you time, Maria, if you want to speak about your experience. You mentioned that earlier.

Maria BROWN-SHEPHERD: Yes. I live on a property, like I said, on the border of Moira shire and Shepp shire, and we were affected by the floods on both sides. The first one came through the channel. We have a spur channel that comes around our property. The banks broke on the sewage farm, and when it came around it absolutely flooded. So we had sandbanks to block off some of the spur channel. At the same time Loch Garry's banks apparently broke too, and the water came from the other side. As a landowner where we are – we were a car sales yard, because people on the Shepp–Barmah road brought all their vehicles and stored them on our property, right – the only access we could have was going through Shepp and going on the

Goulburn Valley Highway. All the other roads were cut. All the properties were flooded also, as far as the Kaarimba recreation reserve, which is along the Shepp–Barmah road. I heard the submission from Col Grinter, who is a landowner and a neighbour of ours. The whole area was impacted by floodwaters. We were shifting sheep to various neighbours in our horse floats, and people could only come out of their own properties on a tractor. The houses were not flooded as such, but the whole land was flooded. So for two weeks they kept coming around to us on their tractors, and then they would take a car to go and get supplies. At one stage I think the supplies were coming in voluntarily.

The CHAIR: So you were cut off.

Maria BROWN-SHEPHERD: We were cut off, but we still could go into Shepp. I could not go into work. I am an educator in childcare services in Numurkah, and I could not go to work. That was not an issue. But we were keeping our own home safe, and we had sandbagged around certain areas to keep the water out.

The CHAIR: I might ask a question. If I could just return to the questions that Dr Ratnam asked with just a bit of a follow-up on the workers who were impacted, what is happening with those workers now? I am assuming some lost their jobs or kept their jobs or visas. Where are they now, and how are they being supported?

Sam ATUKORALA: It is very hard, Chair, to actually find them, to be honest. There are programs to support them, but one thing that they do not actually trust is any authority organisation. I am not sure whether that is the information given by their contractors or subcontractors – not to talk to organisations – or whether they have their individual fears of actually being removed from the country.

The CHAIR: And a lot of these are labour hire.

Sam ATUKORALA: Labour, yes.

The CHAIR: Yes, right.

Sam ATUKORALA: Especially the seasonal workers working orchards and dairy farms and things like that. They come only when they need support and when they are not in a position to actually serve themselves, or if they have to get out of the country or there are very critical situations – that is when they come and approach us, but still they do not want us to report to anybody. They want us to do whatever we can do to support them but not necessarily go beyond our organisations to any authority or anything like that. What we are doing through our community leaders is trying to get that information and support whenever it is possible, but that is it. They are socially disconnected, I should say, because some of them at least are staying at their workplaces; therefore they do not actually have outside connections. Some employers even talk to us and ask, ‘Does ethnic council provide any social support or anything for the workers?’ I think it is from the federal level because of the PALM scheme and those kinds of things. They should put that responsibility either to the government or to the employers who employ these people, because these communities are really vulnerable.

The CHAIR: You were just saying that they are scared to reach out because they are distrustful of authorities and they fear that they might lose their job for actually seeking help in whatever form. How do you think that could be overcome? Is it more engagement with the community leaders or the ethnic council locally and those sorts of groups? How do you think that could be overcome, or do you think it is really not able to be resolved?

Sam ATUKORALA: If you have a good legal framework, then when someone brings a worker from another country there are industrial relations laws that the employer should look to to look after these communities. They actually talk about their legal rights and what they are eligible for. In the meantime, the employers should actually take responsibility for the health and wellbeing of these communities, and some of them do not even have any health care or anything like that – they are trying to actually go into a pharmacy and get some medication. I think if you have a strong legal framework and then give most of the responsibility back to the employers – and also some scrutiny on how they operate these businesses – would be great.

The CHAIR: From what you are saying it sounds like there is a low understanding of perhaps their rights or where to get help in regard to their work situation. Is that –

Sam ATUKORALA: Yes.

The CHAIR: Yes, okay.

Sam ATUKORALA: Yes, definitely. There is a gap, but also, unfortunately, even if you organise information sessions or things like that, they will not be able to come to those sessions because they are working and also staying at the same place. Therefore they do not have the outside world apart from work.

The CHAIR: Yes, because they are living in their workplace, effectively.

Sam ATUKORALA: Some of them, yes. That is information we gathered. They are saying that they are really, really vulnerable.

The CHAIR: Yes. Thank you very much for that. Ms Watt – question?

Sheena WATT: I do. Thank you both very much, and thanks for your patience with the technology. I just want to ask about particular training and development for multicultural leaders in terms of emergency readiness and preparation. Is there any work that has been done to prepare multicultural or community leaders for the work that they do? I know that many just sort of step up in the moment and know that it needs to be done and are there to provide that for their community. Is there any readiness and training that is done by the community leaders associated with the ethnic community council?

Sam ATUKORALA: As an organisation we are trying to educate our bilingual workers, because we retrofit into any emergencies. Therefore we get that exposure, and also, even as I mentioned earlier, we do not have a formal role. We do step in when it is needed, but training as in formal training, not necessarily. We have those kinds of training, but I remember VCOSS, the Victorian Council of Social Service, and ECCV have done some multicultural training. I think Kate was actually part of that.

Kate STEENVOORDEN: Hang on, I can speak to that.

Sam ATUKORALA: Yes, and –

Kate STEENVOORDEN: Sorry, you go, Sam, and then I will add in.

Sam ATUKORALA: However, I think it is important that we build that connection with the emergency services and have time off from there. I know that they are really busy – they are doing a wonderful job. But either they have to have resources within their services, have bilingual workers as their employees, or have some cultural competency and cultural training and time for them to actually connect with the multicultural community leaders and also organisations like us. That would be great.

Sheena WATT: I know there is more. I will just follow up before you go, Kate, just to ask about embedding of your organisation into existing structures that exist around emergency services and response. But I am happy to take that for later if, Kate, you have got more to add.

The CHAIR: Kate, did you want to add now?

Kate STEENVOORDEN: Yes, I might. I will just add that Neighbourhood Collective Australia worked with VCOSS and Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria to develop training for multicultural community leaders during COVID, so it was around COVID response and emergency management. We are just exploring how we might be able to broaden that out to all emergencies and how we could fund that as well. So that worked as a series of masterclasses online and face to face, depending on the need. We know, like you said, multicultural community leaders already have a lot of knowledge and a lot of skill in working with their communities and managing emergencies. It is recognising what people already know and then adding to that skill level and contextualising it in the Australian context. Actually, we have had emergency service staff come along to some of those as well and find them really useful in terms of learning more about what multicultural community leaders are doing.

I think with that question about embedding ethnic councils into emergency service systems, that is something that we recommended and do recommend. We would love to see at a statewide level there be more pressure on the LGA level to include multicultural organisations and leaders into IMTs, into municipal planning et cetera.

We find it is very ad hoc. Some communities and some councils understand it and do it, and with others there is, sadly, quite a dismissal of the need to be catering to multicultural communities. We had one example of a CEO of an ethnic council ask to join their local planning committee and being told, 'Well, we don't think there is really a need. But if you think there is a need, you can come and do a verbal presentation at a meeting in three months time, and then we'll make a decision about whether we think you would be valuable in our committee' – no multicultural representation on that committee at the time, and that was the response.

Sam ATUKORALA: And to add to that actually, Greater Shepparton City Council proactively approached us. So we were given a permanent seat at the municipal emergency management partnership committee, which is actually really valuable because we do have strong connections with the Greater Shepparton City Council, and during COVID and the floods we worked together. As an organisation, as I said, we actually get funding for specific programs. The Greater Shepparton City Council actually has got a lot of resources, and we have a strong partnership with them.

The CHAIR: That is great. All right. Unfortunately we are out of time. I just want to thank you all for coming and giving your presentation. It has been very insightful, so thank you all very much for coming.

Witnesses withdrew.