LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

STANDING COMMITTEE ON HEALTH AND COMMUNITY WELLBEING

(Reference: Inquiry into the West Belconnen supercell thunderstorm)

Members:

MR J DAVIS (Chair)
MR J MILLIGAN (Deputy Chair)
MR M PETTERSSON

TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE

CANBERRA

FRIDAY, 1 JULY 2022

Secretary to the committee:
Dr A Chynoweth (Ph: 620 75498)

By authority of the Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory

WITNESSES

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Amended 20 May 2013

The committee met at 1.30 pm.

SESTERKA, MR PETER
WRIGHT, MR BRUCE

THE CHAIR: Good afternoon, everybody, and welcome. I declare open this public hearing of the Standing Committee on Health and Community Wellbeing at the ACT Legislative Assembly in our inquiry into the west Belconnen supercell thunderstorm. Before we begin, on behalf of the committee, I would like to acknowledge that we meet today on the lands of the Ngunnawal people. We respect their continuing culture and the contribution they make to this city and to this region.

The Assembly referred this inquiry to the committee for consideration on 10 February 2022, and the committee has received a total of 23 submissions. The submissions are available for anyone to read on the committee website.

Today the committee will hear from five witnesses: first, a panel of individuals from the community; second, the Belconnen Community Council; third, Disaster Relief Australia; fourth, Evoenergy; and, fifth, representatives of the ACT government.

The first time a witness speaks today, we will need you to acknowledge that you have read and understood the privilege statement, which is to your right, on the pink paper. Please be aware that all proceedings today are being recorded and transcribed by Hansard and will be published. The proceedings are to be broadcast and webstreamed live.

Should anyone take a question on notice today, please say the words, "I will take that question on notice." It makes it easier for our committee secretariat and witnesses to confirm that those questions are taken on notice, from the transcript.

We will now move to our first witnesses appearing today, Mr Bruce Wright and Mr Peter Sesterka. I appreciate your time this afternoon. Thank you very much for your submission and for appearing before the committee. Before we begin, if you would not mind, I will get you both to acknowledge the privilege statement. We will start with Peter.

Mr Sesterka: I am appearing in my private capacity as a resident affected by the storm impact. I have read and understand the privilege statement.

Mr Wright: I am also appearing in a private capacity, and I have read and understand the privilege statement.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much, gentlemen. Before we begin with questions, would either or both of you like to make a brief opening statement for the committee, to frame your submission today?

Mr Sesterka: I would like to make a statement, up to five minutes or so, if that is suitable.

THE CHAIR: That would be great; thanks.

Mr Wright: I would like to later, if I could.

THE CHAIR: We will start with Peter and then we will head on to Bruce. Thank you, Peter.

Mr Sesterka: I would like to focus on two issues. The first one is the issue of information flow between the energy provider, Evoenergy in this case, and the community. I suggest that there is a need for more accurate and timely information provision from the energy provider, in particular, firstly, on the expected time frames for the restoration of power when there is an outage and, secondly, where your place is in the repair queue. I have to say that it was frustrating looking over my back fence for four days at a massive branch stretching down powerlines, and thinking, "Surely, this will be fixed quick smart?" Four days later, finally, the work gang came and took it away. I could not find information about when that was going to happen.

I think there is a disconnect between the work teams, the workers at the coalface doing this work, and the people who have to answer queries from the public saying, "When is my problem going to be fixed?" I think there is probably room for some better information flow between the coalface and the information providers. I say that fully aware that Evoenergy had nearly 5,000 calls in that week, which is a 1,200 per cent increase on their normal take. It was not an easy task for them; I do acknowledge that.

My suggestions for possible actions, or possible recommendations, flowing from that issue are that the energy provider consider better information flow between the work teams and its information provision workers. For example, possibly it could set up extra hotlines, rather than just relying on the existing team, to quickly answer queries in a timely and accurate way. For example, it happens in some places when there is a major disaster, such as an earthquake. There is an extra set-up in an emergency situation.

It would be good to communicate where homes sit in the priority work list. It would be great if I could ring up and they could say, "Look, it is probably day 4 for you because the power outage in your case only affects a small number of players, rather than tens of thousands. We will get to you, but only in about four days time." If someone had said that to me, I could have planned whether I threw out my freezer food or not. So that kind of information, that is my first issue.

The second issue I would like to focus on is, in my mind, perhaps a more broad-reaching and more substantial one, which is decision-making under the ACT protected tree legislation. I think there is a need to address problems caused by large trees on or near residential properties and powerlines. There is no question that we can expect more intense and frequent storms under climate change scenarios, and if there were not so many large trees on suburban blocks or near powerlines, I think the damage would have been much less.

I suspect that many residents—and this is simply my assertion—would prefer to have some of these massive trees removed from their blocks, if they had the choice. The

choice is not their own; it is subject to legislative process. The suburb I live in is about 50 years old. It has trees that have been there for some 50-plus years. A lot of them are pretty massive trees and they present a pretty substantial threat. They are fairly high-risk trees, and my view is that a lot of them were given unreasonable protection under the ACT protected tree legislation. Getting permission to remove such trees that are problematic, dangerous or high risk has proven to be very difficult. I say that anecdotally, based on reading the press for 30-odd years in Canberra and listening to stories. I have lived in the same place for nearly 30 years and had these trees in my immediate environment.

I also suggest that it is not enough just to prune overhanging branches. Evoenergy sends out requests saying that you have to prune, getting them to 1½ metres or something to that effect. I think it must be assumed that, in the case of severe storms, the whole tree can fall over. That is what happened in my suburb: there was massive damage from very large trees. So that is the first point I make: that it is difficult to get trees removed, based on the current balance of decision-making under the protected tree legislation.

My second theme is that there is a principle here of public versus private cost and good. The protected tree legislation deems that trees are a public good in whatever way—wildlife habitat protection, scenic amenity or whatever—yet the cost of maintaining them has 100 per cent shifted to the private citizen if it is on their block, or even if it is on a powerline. In my case, with the powerline at the back, where the tree fell over, the private citizen had to pay to have all of that pruning done. I had to pay $1,600 to get tree detritus taken away from two trees that I was told I would need permission for if they were to be taken out. It can cost thousands of dollars over years, if you live in the place, to maintain and manage the risks associated with large trees. Getting them cut out, or a large bit taken out, can cost you, anecdotally, more than $10,000, depending on the size and location.

In conclusion, I think that there are issues about rebalancing the decision-making process and priorities under the legislation, with more emphasis needing to be given to private property and public infrastructure protection, as well as tree protection. Trees are important in the environment, but I think there is an imbalance between the decision-making process now, the approvals process, and the risks posed under new climate scenarios from very large old trees in suburban areas overhanging public infrastructure such as powerlines.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Peter. Bruce?

Mr Wright: If I may, I will address the first criterion of the recovery, following the storms we had. In front of our house is a strip of parkland with a couple of rows of pine trees that were planted in 1974; that is my memory. A very large branch from one of those trees came down. In fact, it stayed attached to the trunk at one end, but the other end went across the park, across the footpath, through some branches of a peppercorn and some shrubs in my place and extended into a lot of native shrubs in my place.

I told Fix My Street about it on 4 January. Six-and-a-half weeks later, as it all dried out, we were becoming more concerned that, if somebody dropped a cigarette there,

there would be a fire, because there was lots of forest litter amongst it. If there had been a fire there, it would have spread into our native shrubs and, as they go very close to the house, it would have spread to the house, too. Again I contacted Fix My Street and also sent a letter to Minister Chris Steel. That got no response at all. Then, on 2 March, two months after the storm, urban treescapes sent me an email saying, "The incident has now been resolved and all appropriate action has been taken." At that time no action had been taken except that my wife and I had cleared the footpath and a few people had taken a bit of firewood away.

I was away on 2 March, so on 8 March I sent an email to Minister Steel again, saying that it had not really happened. That did get some action. At 10 am on 9 March a crew turned up and took most of it away. But they left over two metres of the thickest part of the branch and they left a whole lot of litter there. Again I advised both the minister's office and Fix My Street that it had not really been finished. I did get a response from Minister Steel's office then, saying that they had passed on the feedback to an appropriate place. On 22 March, when I did my submission, nothing more had happened.

Since that time, someone has come and removed that stub of the branch, but much of the forest litter has remained. It has been mowed once since and that broke up some of it, but there are still a lot of branches, maybe 60 centimetres long, as thick as my thumb, lying around in the grass. The recovery, I think, was slow and haphazard. It gave me the impression that no-one kept track of what had been done, given that I got an email saying it had been done when it had not. There was no way of knowing whether the job was part complete or fully complete.

If we go to your criterion (b), the appropriateness of communication strategies, Fix My Street, on 4 January, sent me back an email saying, "You should be contacted within 10 working days." Of course, that never happened. It was never going to happen. Fix My Street always used to say that. Mostly it used to happen, a long time ago, but not now. On 3 February the *Canberra Times* published a letter from me saying that there were growing numbers of flashing signs appearing around Belconnen suburbs declaring that the storm clean-up was underway. There was a complete absence of work crews visible, actually doing it, but there were signs telling us they were doing it. That seemed to be about all that was happening.

At some point, the signs changed, to point to the ACT government website for more information. But the information there, too, was vague. As Peter raised, there was no way you could find out when your area might be done. All of the information was vague on the website. Similarly, the *Canberra Times* quoted vague statements at times, talking about work underway. So we just never knew when it was going to happen, and any queries got no response. Even my concern about the fire danger got no response at all; none at all.

On criterion (e), the lessons for the ACT government and other agencies, the job was huge but it seemed not to occur to anyone in government to look for extra resources. I have been in cyclones and things, and it has been routine that local governments, when a cyclone hits, get help from nearby local governments. We did not see any of that. It was some weeks after the storm when we saw a statement in the *Canberra Times* saying that a few people had been moved from one area of government to the

other. Otherwise, there just seemed to be no urgency; none at all.

Worse, it seems to me that the response is almost doomed to be slow and haphazard because that is how public space in Canberra has been managed most of the time since self-government. We see it all the time that nobody actually supervises whether things have been done properly or not. The mowing schedule is a perfect example. It is quite obvious in peak mowing season that the people on the mowers miss bits, quite deliberately, to keep up with their schedule. So an area will just get missed. If you try to raise that issue with government, you get told, "Oh, the schedule is that your area is going to get mowed on such and such a day." Nobody wants to know that it did not get mowed when it was supposed to happen. Nobody checks at all.

We see it in footpath maintenance around the corner from me, from sections of footpath that were replaced. Where there is quite a steep slope, where the footpath goes down from the park, they have left a lot of soil heaped up beside the footpath. I went to Fix My Street to say, "When it rains, this is just going to wash across the footpath, and it will be slippery." The response from Fix My Street was to give my phone number to the contractor, who rang me up and complained that I had complained about his work. It was never fixed. When it rained, of course, it went across the path.

In Mein Place in Latham—it is a cul-de-sac—every Thursday morning the garbage truck drives up on the nature strip to make the turn. So dirt flows down into the garden. Then the vacuum truck comes along and says, "There is too much dirt there for me to sweep up," so he cuts around the dirt that is in the gutter and leaves it there to wash into Ginninderra Creek.

At the Belconnen dog park, some years ago, they planted some new trees—all good. Belconnen dog park is a prime example of Belconnen clay, and these trees were literally planted in Belconnen clay, with big orange tags attached saying, "Do not plant these trees in clay. They do not like clay." Needless to say, some of them died. A few years ago they fenced off a bit of the dog park and they put some new irrigation in and scratched the soil a little bit and put some grass seed in. But they did not put the grass seed in until winter, and then the new irrigation stopped working, so the grass failed. They have just gone in again, in exactly the same area, scratched around the soil a little bit, thrown a couple of seeds in, put a new irrigation system in—at vast expense, I have no doubt—and they did it in winter. So the parrots are having a good time; they are not going to see much grass come out of it.

Routinely, cars around suburban Canberra drive up and down parks and leave big ruts. Trucks park on nature strips; cars park all over parks and nature strips. I saw a letter to the editor in the *Canberra Times* a few weeks ago where someone had been complaining to government about cars on nature strips and the response from government was, essentially, "Our parking inspectors give priority to cars that are creating a danger by blocking sight lines." But of course they don't, because most of the parking fines, I am sure, will go to people who overstay parking in Civic or Woden. The point is: saying that we focus on safety does not acknowledge that these people are damaging public infrastructure. The government refuses to do anything about it. It is wilful damage of public assets, but nobody does anything.

Back in 1998 I was fortunate to win the inaugural capital research scholarship of the International Council for Canadian Studies. I studied the impacts of systems of governance on federal capitals, basically looking at Canberra and Washington DC. At that time—and only slightly less so now—Washington DC had a huge problem in that it had a magic central area which was very well maintained, but local government was very shy of money, so maintenance outside that central area was very poor. What has happened over the years is that the workforce, largely, has moved to live outside Washington DC. So you have very rich people living in Washington DC and all of the very poor people living outside Washington DC, with government services, generally, being appalling. Back in 1998 I wrote:

> In the long term, the crisis in Washington DC has a lesson for other federal capital territories, including Australia. Both a symptom and a cause of Washington's current problems is the exodus of population to suburban developments outside the federal territory, driving and driven by increasing taxes and the poor standard of government services within the federal territory.
>
> As Canberra's population grows and urban development spills over the border into the state of New South Wales, people working in Canberra will increasingly have the choice of living within the federal territory or outside it. Unless the federal territory remains competitive in the race to attract residents, it simply will head down the spiral of a falling population, leading to increased taxes, lower services and further exodus of the population.

I have seen nothing since to change my mind about that.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Bruce. And thank you very much, Peter. What we will do now is have rapid-fire questions, in the next 10 minutes, from all three committee members. As the chair, I get the privilege of starting off with the first one. If you would not mind, I would like to propose a hypothetical to both of you. You both raised, amongst a myriad of challenges for the committee to consider, two that really struck me: the timeliness and effectiveness of communications and then the boots on the ground to actually do the work needed, when the work needs to get done.

The committee can make a number of recommendations to government, but in the short time I have been here I have come to expect that maybe half of your good ideas might get taken up, so prioritising is important. Would you, if you were in our position, prioritise more people within organisations like Access Canberra to provide timely and effective communications, meaning that you knew exactly what was happening, when it was happening, even if it took some time, or would you prioritise investments in perhaps being left in the dark but creating more positions for actual boots on the ground, men and women providing maintenance services out there, getting on top of the clean-up? I know that is quite a broad hypothetical, but in terms of priorities, where would you probably put your resources?

Mr Sesterka: In my personal case, it would have been nice to ring someone up, not wait 10, 15 or 20 minutes to get through to someone, and then to get information that was relevant and timely. In response to those two scenarios, it is a bit tricky to have one or the other fixing the problem, but if you have more people paid to answer phones then that is only effective if they are given the right information from the workplace. If you have more money spent on coalface workers then you might not

know when the job will get done but it will probably get done a lot quicker. If I had to pick one of those two, I would probably say more investment in workers at the coalface, working on fixing the problems—powerlines et cetera.

THE CHAIR: I should stress that it is not my position that you should have to pick between the two, but in the interests of prioritising what the committee jumps up and down about—

Mr Sesterka: Yes. I would probably go for the second one, in that case.

THE CHAIR: I appreciate that, Peter. Bruce?

Mr Wright: I think the major priority is fixing the management of public space across suburbia, period. I think the reason that the clean-up was so haphazard is that people out there are just doing what they can and nobody is actually keeping on top of whether it has been done, whether it has been done properly and whether they are doing the best work. In terms of communication, I do not think you need more people; you just need smarter. One person, in an hour a day, could find out what was being done today, tomorrow and next week, and could put it on the website. Then the signs could just point people to the website.

THE CHAIR: Very clear. Thank you very much.

MR MILLIGAN: Obviously, communication has been a major concern in both your submissions and for the community generally. I think it was you, Peter, who talked about priority areas—that there could be a potential list of jobs and you could see the status of your particular issue and where it is rated in terms of priority. How do you think that the government could provide this? Could they provide a portal or something where you could hop online to have a look at the emergency that has happened, and have on that same portal a list of problem areas and where the government is up to?

Mr Sesterka: Yes. My recollection is that you can look at Evoenergy's website. There is some kind of outage bracket there that you can consult. But it does not help you to know where you sit in the fix-it list. If you are going to have a priority list, there needs to be some person, or persons, coordinating. If there are jobs all over town, all over Belconnen—two, three, four, five, six jobs where things are being repaired—I suspect those different work teams do not talk to each other.

I am not sure to what extent the information providers at the end of the telephone talk to the work teams. So maybe there is a need for a strategic process where information is gathered from the different geographic locations, fed into a central node of some sort, and then there is some analysis done, saying, "Okay, Mataranka Street, Hawker, is going to be four days from now because it has only affected 30 houses, rather than three or four thousand, so we can have a good guess at that."

MR MILLIGAN: Do you have anything to add, Bruce, in terms of how—

Mr Wright: No. I think it is a similar situation, isn't it? We were lucky that we only had a very brief power outage. But somebody in the organisation needs to be

communicating with the workers, to know what is happening and to let us know. That can be done both on the website and via a press release pretty easily.

MR MILLIGAN: Yes. Okay.

Mr Sesterka: Could I add to that?

MR MILLIGAN: Yes.

Mr Sesterka: Just on that theme, my specific example is that on Friday, 7 January, four days after the storm, we got the message from Evoenergy saying that the power would be back that afternoon, Friday the 7th. This did not happen. A subsequent message said, if the power was not on, to call back. We were then told it would be back on Sunday, 9 January. Based on that advice, I threw out all of my perishables.

We then went down the road because we noticed that there was a work gang a few houses down, where the big branch was on our powerlines. We asked them. They said, "It will be back on tonight, Friday, 7 January," and it was. Because I was dealing with the coalface, I got spot-on, timely information and it was right. That information could be fed through to the central system of information answering, and maybe that would work. But that was just my case.

MR MILLIGAN: Okay. Thank you, gentlemen.

MR PETTERSSON: You have both spoken a lot about trees and powerlines. I was wondering if either of you accessed, or considered accessing, the emergency hub set up in Higgins.

Mr Sesterka: I did not. I did not feel a need to do that. No.

Mr Wright: Powerlines were not an issue for me. I was not aware of any emergency thing in Higgins. In a sense, except for our rising concern about fire, it was not an emergency. We cleared the footpath and then it was there. It was only the rising concern about fire that started to cause me angst.

On the communication thing, it happens so often in government that government never wants to commit itself. So the statements on the website and in the press conference were all vague about when things would happen, and I think they were deliberately vague because nobody wanted to make promises.

MR PETTERSSON: Were there any social services that were required by you or your neighbours in the time after the storm?

Mr Wright: Not that I am aware of.

Mr Sesterka: Not in my case. There was some issue of elderly neighbours—communicating with them, walking down the street to say, "How is it going? Do you need anything?" But, basically, I think we all managed pretty well.

Mr Wright: Certainly, in our case, neighbours did go and check on each other.

MR PETTERSSON: That is good. Thanks.

THE CHAIR: Given the time, I have just one more quick question which I can slip in. I will not hold you to a figure; I just want to solidify my thoughts. You both had to do a lot of work to clean up at your properties and around your properties, immediately after the storm, both inside the borders of your block and in the surrounding area. If you were to put a rough percentage on how much the government did and how much you did in your area—you and your family and your neighbours—to clean up immediately after the storm, what would a rough figure be?

Mr Wright: Certainly, in our area, where trees were across roads, neighbours did a lot of work. There were some small branches on the road near our place, but that was minor. Neighbours did a lot of work. In my case also, as we got more and more concerned about the fire danger, a neighbour came and took five ute loads of small stuff away from where we were. The government did the heavy stuff that we were not capable of doing. We did light stuff, basically.

THE CHAIR: Okay. That is good. Thank you, Bruce. Peter?

Mr Sesterka: My situation did not require government assistance, as such, because none of the trees that caused me damage or problems were on public land, so to speak. I just had a couple of trees on my block, some which fell over into my neighbour's house. I paid for people to come and take them away. I did work myself and I paid private contractors to prune the trees and clear away the damage. The total cost, for me, of doing that was about $1,600. There was no government work required, or that could have been required, because it was all my private business on my land.

THE CHAIR: Thank you.

MR MILLIGAN: Obviously, there was no government assistance or financial support to clear debris on your own land. What could the government be doing, do you think, in a situation where you might be dealing with someone with a physical disability or needing help financially?

Mr Sesterka: In that case, obviously, it is hard to do that yourself. It is hard to fund it yourself if you are on a reduced or very low income. There is an issue there. I would like to augment that statement by saying that a lot of these trees are deemed public goods. You cannot take them out even if you want to. Getting approval to take them out is often difficult. I say that anecdotally, based on years of watching these examples. You are left with the cost of maintaining, for example, a very large gum tree metres from your front door.

There are many sorts of costs that go with that, apart from pruning—all sorts of things that a large tree involves, whether it is lifting foundations or driveways, as in my case. You cannot just get rid of that problem; you have to pay for it. If you can afford to do that, that is great. If you do not want the tree there, you are still forced to have it and to pay for its maintenance. I think that is my main contention. That issue ought to be looked at, because there are probably going to be more storms and more damage to private property and public infrastructure, and the cost has been very much

imbalanced, forced onto the private citizen.

MR MILLIGAN: So it would be pretty much like having a system where you are mapping high-risk trees in areas.

Mr Sesterka: Indeed.

MR MILLIGAN: Are you aware of any residents who had made a complaint or an application to have a tree removed and then during this recent storm that tree actually did cause damage—without naming names or anything?

Mr Sesterka: Yes. One of my neighbours down the road that I have known for decades had two large gum trees on the front nature strip area. One of them, I believe, was earmarked for removal but still had not been removed. Another one, which had not been, fell over in the storm and it was cut down and taken away by the authorities. I think she was very happy about that, so yes.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much, Bruce and Peter, for your submissions and for appearing before the committee today. In the next few days you will receive a proof transcript of the *Hansard*. It is your opportunity to let us know if there are any corrections that need to be made. If there is any follow-up information from today's conversation that you want to provide to the committee, if you could do that at some point in the next week, that would be ideal. Otherwise, we thank you both very much for your time.

Short suspension.

HYDE, MR GLEN, Chair, Belconnen Community Council
WATTS, MR MATT, Deputy Chair, Belconnen Community Council

THE CHAIR: We move to our next witnesses appearing today, Mr Glen Hyde and Mr Matt Watts from the Belconnen Community Council. On behalf of the committee, gentlemen, thank you very much for appearing today and for your written submission to the inquiry. I remind you of the protections and obligations that are afforded to you by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the privilege statement. That is the pink document on your right. Would you both acknowledge that you have read and understood that statement? We will start with Glen.

Mr Hyde: I have read the statement and acknowledge it.

Mr Watts: I have read and acknowledge the statement.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much. Before we begin with questions, gentlemen, would you like to start with an opening statement?

Mr Hyde: No. We do not intend to waste the committee's time. I think the first and last paragraphs of our submission cover off any opening statement that we would wish to make.

THE CHAIR: They do indeed. I will start with the first question, just to help the whole committee to provide context. Roughly how many members of the Belconnen Community Council would you say were affected by this storm?

Mr Hyde: I will take that one and leave the supplementary to Matt: everyone.

THE CHAIR: Right.

Mr Hyde: Every single member of our community was affected by the storm in some way, shape or form, whether it was directly through damage to a home, to property, to trees on their boundaries, within their boundaries, or whether it was those who went and provided assistance to neighbours, which was, to me, one of the most heartening things I think I have seen in all of my time on this planet. That sense of community was never more evident than in the hours after the storm.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much.

Mr Watts: It should be noted that everyone who lives and works in the Belconnen community, the Belconnen district, is in fact considered a member of the BCC in a broad sense. As Glen said, the impact was massive. I support his comments.

THE CHAIR: Great. I appreciate that.

MR MILLIGAN: How would you balance the need to increase our urban canopy in our suburbs with the requirement to avoid damage to utilities, services or property? Obviously, from this storm that went through in January, a lot of trees fell. Is there a particular type of tree that is more at risk of something like this, and should the

government be addressing this in their future plan to increase urban canopy coverage?

Mr Hyde: I think the evidence was pretty clear when we did our little walk around Magpies Belconnen Golf Club. The variety of trees that were felled—not just the ones that were damaged substantially and then were required to be removed—was mainly native gums. Yes, there were a great number of pine trees that had reached the end of their 20 to 25-year life cycle that were already earmarked to be removed, but the storm just helped that process along.

We would expect that the examination of appropriate species for replanting, as well as the ongoing situation in new suburbs, would need to be looked at closely. We have had 20-odd years of examination of west Belconnen through the Jarramlee project, where we looked at a range of flora and fauna that was affected by the development of the suburb of Dunlop. So there are things that we can draw upon to assist us, but I think the real evidence lies out in our green waste facilities and places like the golf club, where those trees currently are situated.

Mr Watts: It is an interesting question. I think there are also systemic questions, though, related to that. One of the anecdotal claims to have come out of this process is that a number of people, whether they made the claim in a submission or made it just generally in the community, state that they had reported certain trees either for a full removal or a branch removal and that was not done—either because it was not scheduled in time before the storm or, quite worryingly, it was reported to government that this was a danger or a risk to property and the official assessment, allegedly, was that the tree posed no significant risk and therefore should stay.

That is something which was not covered by the ACT government's submission to this committee. Without this committee, I do not think there would have been a public opportunity to holistically have input after the storm, noting that, whilst the ACT government did have a post-incident review—something like that—that did not formally engage with members of the public.

Members of the public, as we have heard, took time to remove trees from arterial roads. Of course, it was mentioned in the ACT government's submission that the ACT government was responsible for removing trees from arterial roads. But it was not mentioned that members of the community did a lot of that, and it was not mentioned that members of the community had anecdotally reported trees for removal or maintenance and that was not undertaken.

There are questions in my mind about the degree of maintenance of the canopy, noting that everyone that I know loves trees, wants a canopy, but it is about the appropriateness of the tree in relation to private property and infrastructure, noting the risk to lives and livelihoods, and that is something that I think should be investigated a bit more deeply. As for the mix of trees, I am not an expert. All we can do is relay the outcome of the management of the canopy, and we have all seen what it was.

THE CHAIR: On that, I appreciate that point about the tree canopy and the fact that there seems to be broad community consensus to want more trees and a vibrant tree canopy, but I wonder if this experience has tempered that enthusiasm in some of the people that you speak to and some people in Belconnen who have been affected by

the storms. Do you sense that there is less enthusiasm or maybe even a resistance to meet some of the government's targets under its urban tree canopy because of the effects of this storm?

Mr Hyde: I think the general feedback that we have had is that people still want to see the urban tree canopy to the levels that the government has prescribed. What they would like to see, on the back of what happened in January, is a more vigorous program for assessment, maintenance, and removal and replacement. That is the part of the mix that we really did not have any sort of clarity or any real community visibility over, prior to the storm, so I think if there is a lesson learnt, that is the one.

THE CHAIR: Thank you.

Mr Watts: Following on from that, we, in the last couple of months, have had representatives from the ACT government speak to the Belconnen community's public meeting and there was a proposal to extend the coverage afforded to trees under the tree preservation strategy. I actually thought it was an interesting proposal, given that it has only been within the last year or less that we have had the massive storm and seen the impacts of trees, and yet there we were, being told that there was a proposal to reduce the height threshold to protect trees.

Absolutely, there are benefits in having the canopy and benefits in even having dead trees within our suburbs, for their ability to house wild animals and whatnot and for dead trees to be on the ground for all sorts of environmental reasons. But I know that, in relation to your question, I will certainly be revising the height of the trees around my property and I will be making sure that, with any trees that I deem to be of risk to my house, my fence, or a car, I would be looking at the height of the tree and taking action accordingly before that law comes into place, if it does proceed.

THE CHAIR: Okay; thank you very much.

MR PETTERSSON: I was wondering what the state of play in Belconnen is right now with people waiting for their homes to be repaired.

Mr Hyde: When we did our walk around at the golf club, I mentioned the hive of activity that had occurred the weekend before your visit and how timely that seemed to be, fortuitous or otherwise. At the moment, I think we are at a point where we have probably done 95 to 98 per cent of repairs. There are some properties that I am aware of that are waiting for special services to be provided, but, by and large, I think we are probably between 95 and 98 per cent complete.

Mr Watts: I would agree with that. Obviously, there is a sliding scale of impact. It was only perhaps three green waste bins ago that I was able to finally get rid of the last of my green waste. I did not choose to pay for anyone to take it away; I just piled it up. But I do know of other people who have spent quite a lot of money to have just the green waste removed. One of my neighbours on Tillyard Drive was going around chainsawing massive felled trees out of the way of footpaths and roads. By the time he had finished the block, he looked across the road and saw that one of his neighbours had had a big tree removed which had been felled in the storm, and apparently that person had paid seven grand for it to be removed.

There are a lot of hidden costs which have not come out of any government review, because, as far as I can tell, there has been no official government review of this, no survey that we are aware of. We can facilitate information flows, but, again, it is a great thing that this committee is looking into the storm, although I am not sure that all of the costs and all of the status of repairs will come out.

THE CHAIR: I am interested to know if you have had any experiences with—either yourselves or anybody who is part of the community council, or people that you work for—or have accessed any of the government's social services. Mr Pettersson has highlighted a facility that was stood up in Higgins, but there are also some of those social services that directly remediate not damage but the subsequent impacts of being the victim of or having experienced a weather event like this. Are you aware of anyone accessing those services and what those experiences were like?

Mr Hyde: I am aware of a number of people who have accessed services, not just from a food and essentials perspective but the health and mental health services that went with it. I think the great sleeper in the storm was the effect mentally on people, not just those who had property damage, not just those who went out and assisted people, but those who had never been through an event like that before. We are not just talking about children who are recent to the planet; we are talking about a range of people who have lived in relatively calm environments.

I think if we have learned anything from this process it is that it happened at a time when we had had other major disruption. We had had the smoke inundation from the bushfires in 2019-20. Then we had the hailstorm. Then we had COVID. So we had built up a fair amount of community resilience, but that does not deal with everyone's experience. The government, with, I believe, some assistance from the insurance companies, set up a range of services that people could access, not always as a one-stop shop, but from a reasonably centralised place. Whether that was an electronic platform or a walk-in centre, they are much of a muchness.

It is the availability of services post the initial contact where the real challenge comes. The feedback that certainly has come back to us is that the government, if they pony up with insurance companies to provide certain services, need to have a closer look at what happens post the initial contact, after the first round of assistance is provided, and then the follow-up. The follow-up is the bit that seems to be missing and the part where most people have said to us, "If you are going in to speak to this inquiry, ask them if they can do something more in that space."

THE CHAIR: That is really good to know. Thank you. Did you have anything to add?

Mr Watts: No.

MR MILLIGAN: What feedback has the Belconnen Community Council received from vulnerable residents in terms of their experience from the storm back in January?

Mr Watts: As Glen mentioned before, it has been a tough few years, so this was just another thing to add to the list, really. There are people doing it tough, but it should be

noted that, within our existence as a forum, you will not necessarily hear all of the concerns raised in the public forum. Behind the scenes, as Glen alluded to before, some people will say, "Hey, what about this; what about that?" And, yes, ongoing support is something that a number of people are curious about.

If you have people really doing it tough, they are probably not going to turn up to a community council meeting as often as you might think, noting that some people would be maybe working that extra job or dealing with other things. The people who are doing it tough may well be taking care of their kids, for example. It is really not something that the BCC can fill the void of. But, certainly, if there were to be better communication about what services are available to help people through this tough time, that would be welcomed.

MR MILLIGAN: Okay, so, pretty much, communication is one of the key problem areas.

Mr Watts: I am not suggesting it is a problem area. It might be; I do not have the empirical evidence for it, but the problem is those who are doing it most tough are not necessarily the most vocal about it. So where we are left is with more anecdotal evidence of a third party saying, "Hey, I have a mate who is doing it tough," rather than that person coming forward to us.

Mr Hyde: I do not know if you have had this raised previously, but there is a security aspect to this. Vulnerable people usually have security concerns, whether it is their own personal safety, or they might be homeless, or they might be at the end of a lease, or they might be economically challenged. That brings issues of food security and access to water when the electricity is out and there is nothing to heat the water. There are all those sorts of things that many of us take for granted that a group in our community, particularly when we have a severe weather event, do not have access to, cannot get access to, because they do not have a family or a friendship network that they can rely on. So then they rely on government to meet that gap, and that is not an unrealistic expectation.

MR PETTERSSON: In your submission you state that you do not know what the answer to the communication problem is; it is not your job to have the answer. I was hoping that you could inform the committee of what problems were experienced by people trying to access information. Could they not find the appropriate avenues to access it or could they not maintain power et cetera?

Mr Hyde: I think the feedback that we have had generally has been what you have already heard in relation to not enough people to answer the calls and then the triaging of the calls. It was the fact that people did not know where they sat in the system. They were not given any sort of feedback other than, "Thank you very much. We can generally tell you it will be X period of time," or "You will be contacted by Y group to establish when that assistance can be provided." I think there is a lot of work that needs to be done, not just between TCCS and the emergency management groups but other areas of government, because we have to find ways to fund this. We have to find ways to be more responsive, and then we have to build the platforms that make that work.

In our submission we talk about the smartphone being the most readily used appliance to be able to give people access. If you are not technologically savvy, if you simply use it to make a phone call and not for much else, there is a gap there. So we need to be able to find ways to do that gap analysis, not just as a government but as a community. That response needs to come from both government and community to support people who are not able to do those things for themselves.

To go back to the substance of your question, the real, direct feedback has been: "We don't know where we are in the process. We have made our call, we have engaged with Fix My Street, we have talked to somebody from Emergency Services on a number we were given, but we really don't know much more than that." So if the committee can make recommendations that allow government to do that exploratory work and identify where those gaps can be met, either through technology or people, I think that is a hugely valuable step.

Mr Watts: I would agree with that. Following on from what was asked and answered earlier in the afternoon, I do not think it is a binary question of whether you allocate people to the phones for the communication or to the work to fix it, because the skills required to cut up trees are quite different to telephony skills and whatnot.

Obviously, the management of expectations is important. It goes to the ability to have self-agency. If you want to take charge, as most people, I imagine, would, you need to know what you are dealing with. Not having that level of confidence in what you are working with adds to the mental health pressures not only of the individual but of the family. That is something for the committee to consider: that it is not a matter of holding people to account. It is about enabling people to make decisions to inform their prioritisation of behaviours.

Mr Hyde: If I can just add to that, it is one of those processes that we have talked about a lot in recent times. We plan to survive events, but we do not plan to recover well. I think if we have done anything brilliantly over the last few years, through bushfires, hailstorms, COVID and now this supercell storm, the community resilience is something we can tap into to better inform us. I am not suggesting that the government send people out to every neighbourhood and do surveys, but find a channel that you can readily manage to gather that information. That is where we come in. We are happy to host any event the government thinks is worthwhile in order to get that information, to be able to plug those gaps.

MR PETTERSSON: Thanks. I have one quick follow-up. It was touched on earlier. The community hub at Higgins: how widely known do you think that service was during the crisis?

Mr Watts: It was known. Anecdotally, again, there was a question of whether it was for me. You know: "That is for people really doing it tough." Does that mean it is for me, if my power is out and I need to recharge my phone, or is that for someone who has lost their actual house, not knowing the level of damage out there? I knew of it; I did not use it. I know some people who went there occasionally, people who are good friends. But in terms of the broader awareness, I do not have the empirical evidence to back up any response to that.

Mr Hyde: Some of the things that we heard in the days afterwards from friends and family were what informed us most, rather than some massive wave of feedback through a channel that we manage. From my personal perspective, it is exactly as Matt has related. It was: "Is this something for me or is there somebody that I might be displacing whilst I am there who has a greater need than me?"

Again, it was a great initiative and a wonderful idea, but did we provide people with enough information for them to do that self-assessment, rather than say, "Go down and find out for yourself"? That is not a criticism, because it was stood up very quickly and people really appreciated that it was done as quickly as it was, but the real question of: "Is it for me? Will I be displacing somebody who is more worthy than I am?" is one of the things that we should be looking at for that plan for recovery.

Mr Watts: I might ask the question: is this the sort of facility which would be stood up in any natural event or is it an ad hoc approach? Should there be a fire in the future, will it be in Higgins or will it be somewhere else—if at all? In terms of building up long-term resilience and awareness of the services, if there is consistency in education on that front, that might be useful.

THE CHAIR: That is a very good point. Matt and Glen, thank you very much for your time. Thank you for your written submission. On behalf of the entire committee, the written submission and your time are very much appreciated, and we thank you.

Over the next few days you will be sent a proof transcript of today's *Hansard*. That is a good opportunity to correct the record if there have been any mistakes made. If at any point over the next week you have further information or a clarification you want to provide to the committee, to help us in preparing our report, if you could send that through by the end of next week that would be ideal. We thank you very much for your time.

Mr Watts: Thank you.

Mr Hyde: Wonderful. Thank you.

Short suspension.

YOUNG, MR MICHAEL, Manager, ACT Disaster Relief Team, Disaster Relief Australia

THE CHAIR: Mr Young, on behalf of the committee, thank you very much for your submission and for agreeing to appear today. Could you start with an acknowledgement that you have read and understood the privilege statement, which is just to the right of you?

Mr Young: Yes, I have read and acknowledge the privilege statement.

THE CHAIR: Tremendous. I remind you that the privilege statement does afford protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege. Would you like to start with an opening statement?

Mr Young: Sure. Thank you for the opportunity to put forward a submission and also to appear today. Disaster Relief Australia is a veteran-led volunteer organisation. We operate in eight locations currently around Australia. I manage the team here in the ACT and southern New South Wales region. Our team consists of 160 and a rapidly increasing number of volunteers. They are all ex-military or emergency services. We have some skilled civilians—nurses and so on.

As an organisation, we are a registered charity and we do not intend or pretend to be a replacement for emergency services. Often we find that where we come into our own is after the acute response to any disaster, be it floods, fires, storms et cetera, where the emergency services come in and do their bit. Often the lights go off, the trucks go away and then everyone is left with: "So what do we do now?" That is usually when DRA hits the ground, at that particular point. We are not emergency services. We do not necessarily respond in that acute phase. It is usually the long-term recovery phase, after the SES and RFS do their bit, and they go back to their daily lives, so to speak.

As an organisation in the ACT we have been running for two years. Our support was not requested as part of the response to the particular storm cell. Part of the reason for being here today and raising these particular points is that we have the capability to support other organisations in doing so. In the ACT currently we have around 160 personnel. They are all trained and qualified in things like chainsaw operations and removing debris—all the things that needed to be done immediately after the storm cell hit west Belconnen.

You may be aware that prior to the federal election both the Labor and Liberal parties made a funding commitment of $38.1 million over three years to DRA. That is not only to grow and sustain operations in 10 sites around the country, including the ACT, but also the intent is to grow the number of volunteers to over 6,000, largely being military veterans.

The reason we focus on the military veteran and the emergency services type person is that when they leave those organisations they often find themselves looking for a similar kind of thing moving forward. What we have identified, as an organisation, is that those individuals have an amazing breadth and set of skills and knowledge. Where they do their best work is often in austere environments in disaster situations.

When you bring that skill set together with the immediate post-disaster response and relief effort, that is basically an opportunity where DRA does its best work. It was in a position to help in the storms but was not actually called in to assist in that particular situation.

In the ACT and in the region, over the last two years we have done substantial work within Eurobodalla Shire and Bega Valley Shire. We have assisted over 300 houses of individuals there—everything from sifting ashes through to removing dead trees, fencing and a range of other things. Around the Batlow area it was the same kind of thing—helping people to take that first step after the worst day in their life, helping them to move forward. Often we have found, working in those environments, that people are just lost and do not know what to do. They do not know where to go next, particularly individuals that are elderly, have disabilities and so on, or even people on low incomes. They often do not have the resources to be able to engage contractors or others to do the work.

Specifically in relation to the storm cells, obviously you have thousands of fallen trees. If people do not have the ability to either resolve that situation themselves or pay for others to do that then they are often stuck. Some may or may not have insurance. We have teams of chainsaw operators and chainsaws, equipment and vehicles that basically come into those situations. We assist those individuals to remove, cut up and in some instances dispose of all of that waste, and the expectation is nothing. We do not expect to be paid. We do not expect anything in return. We are just there to help the individuals.

From a funding and financial perspective, as I mentioned before, we are provided with some financial support currently through the Department of Veterans' Affairs. We also have a range of private sector and other philanthropic partners. Mitsubishi provide a vehicle fleet. We work very closely with organisations like Minderoo Foundation. Through that organisation we are doing a substantial amount of community resilience work, looking at creating resilient communities. Recently, we ran an exercise in Mogo, down on the South Coast, doing exactly that. That is all I wanted to say in the opening statement. Did you have any questions or anything you would like me to expand on?

THE CHAIR: I have plenty, but I only get one to start and then we will go to the other committee members. Mr Young, from reading your submission, I can see that your organisation has a relationship with the ACT government.

Mr Young: Yes.

THE CHAIR: Your organisation has been called on by the ACT government to provide support on other occasions, and I am particularly struck by delivering 2,225 boxes of food to 1,050 locations across the ACT in the first two weeks of lockdown.

Mr Young: Yes.

THE CHAIR: So you are well known to the ACT government. You even won an award. Why do you imagine you were not called upon, if you had 160 volunteers with very specific skills, for the very specific problem we had? Can you help the

committee to understand why someone did not think to pick up the phone and call you?

Mr Young: It is an interesting question. Certainly, as you point out, not long before this storm event during the back end of last year we had worked with the Community Services Directorate, VolunteeringACT and the Canberra Relief Network to deliver all of the food hampers and packages. There were about 4,000 packages delivered to over 2,000 locations over about a seven or eight-week period. That was a large logistics exercise and we worked with those organisations.

The only thing I can put it down to is that that was working through the Community Services Directorate, as distinct from ESA and the emergency services space and other directorates in that area. They may not have had a great deal of visibility or understanding of what our capability is. That is something you would obviously need to ask them about. As I say, we were on standby and ready to roll in those types of events, and that is what we do well.

THE CHAIR: Has there been any engagement since that disaster? Obviously, that happened, you were not called to help and that rings alarm bells. Have organisations like ESA, or any other part of ACT government, reached out to you? Or has your organisation reached out to any part of ACT government, separate to this committee process, to try and foster that relationship so that we are prepared for the next inevitable event?

Mr Young: I have not been contacted by anyone specifically within ACT government. However, we have had meetings with a number of different people and individuals. The other thing, too, is that obviously the organisation is not operating discretely within a state or territory. What we tend to do with the 2,000-odd volunteers we have currently is deploy wherever the need is.

When the submission was put in, we were right in the middle of the north New South Wales floods. Since then we ended up with, I think, nine or 10 weeks worth of boots on the ground in that particular location. Obviously, when those types of large events occur, that is where the organisation's focus is in responding then and there rather than following up what did not happen sometime earlier.

In relation to that, it gives you a good understanding of our capability. We were operating in Coraki, just out of Lismore. We have all seen the footage and the photographs of how devastating that location was. We hit the ground and, as we usually do, put in place an incident management team. All the frameworks we use are exactly the same as those that emergency services use. The guy on the ground that was actually leading that first week is a senior inspector for QFES in Queensland. He is the head of disaster preparedness for Queensland. He is a well-trained and experienced individual.

We found that not only did we bring teams of volunteers onto the ground but also we played a critical role in coordinating a lot of work that the ADF was doing. Often what occurs is that the ADF hit the ground, but they do not necessarily have the command and control structure and they do not necessarily understand disasters and emergencies in that context. Often they have people there, but they do not know what

the priorities are and quite what to do. Our incident management team coordinates the work for the ADF and the region as well as some of the emergency services organisations operating there. We shifted focus, to be honest, to Coraki and other areas like that rather than focus on what did not happen in January.

THE CHAIR: Just to be specific: if someone in government called you at that particular time when this storm happened, would you have had the capacity to be able to help? First of all, would you have helped? Did you have the capacity to help, and approximately how many volunteers do you think you could have mobilised at that point in time to help?

Mr Young: As I say, our usual operation is not to respond immediately when the storm occurs. We normally assist in the post-acute response. Storms are a good example, because often the storm goes through and you end up with all of these trees on the ground and the initial emergency is over quite quickly. Often you have lots of debris, lots of trees on the ground and so on, and that needs to be resolved. We had teams available. It was January and people are away from Canberra and so on at that time of year, but we had people available and ready to respond. I could not give you an exact number because we would normally have to mobilise and see who was available at that point, but we were available. We could have assisted, and we were able to assist.

As I say, we operate nationally, so when we see those types of events occur, we are not just mobilising the 160 we have here on the ground; we can mobilise 2,000 other people nationally for those large-scale events. We can put people on planes and get them here if those severe types of things occur.

MR MILLIGAN: It is a no-brainer in this situation. As I understand it, DRA comes out post an emergency and can provide all of the services that are desperately needed, particularly in this situation. Also, as I understand it, DRA provides and builds for resilience going forward.

Mr Young: Yes.

MR MILLIGAN: Can you talk a little about what that actually means so that we can get a better understanding of how that may be applied post the emergency that happened in January?

Mr Young: There are probably a couple of aspects there. Firstly, we are working with Minderoo Foundation to run a resilience program around Australia. The intent of that program is to identify the 50 most in-need communities around the country and to then undertake, effectively, a "big map" exercise and other engagement with the local community to identify what the risks are and where the hazards are and also identify what can be done well ahead of time to be able to prepare for the inevitable event that will come at some point.

We ran a workshop in Mogo only a few weeks ago, just as an example. What we literally do is get a big map. It is literally a map, five or six or 10 metres by 10 metres. We put it on the ground and walk through effectively what in the military would be called a war game. We look at all of the terrain and the topography. We look at the

particular infrastructure in that locality and identify vulnerabilities and risks. From that exercise there are a few really interesting learnings. One is that you have all of these people around the outside. For some of them it is the first time they really see where they are located from that kind of perspective. The conversations that have happened around the map include: "We've got this particular problem; how do we solve it?" "I can solve it for you."

Getting everyone around a focal point is quite critical and often you solve problems through that. The other thing is that it identifies some of the risks and hazards, and also for the local community. As an example, one of the biggest threats down there is flooding and fire. The issue they often run into is that there are no storm gauges and no flood gauges. The creek floods and everyone goes, "Where did that come from?" Well, it is a pretty known event, and we know it is going to happen.

Likewise with bushfire, the New South Wales Rural Fire Service has an app where you can configure a whole range of different data items. It will actually give you indications around fire severity and others. It is about making the community aware of those sorts of things and giving them an indication of the kind of response they are likely to get from the Rural Fire Service, in this example.

The community came to recognise very quickly that they have two quite old trucks sitting in the shed. This fire is going to be 50 metres high and it is going to be on them within minutes. Those things are going to put out a dribble of water and the next support that is going to arrive could be two hours away. That, in itself, whilst a scary realisation, is a realisation that you cannot stay and defend, for example; you have to evacuate. Part of it is that discussion around those hazards and risks. Off the back of that is identifying key activities that can be done to minimise some of those hazards or risks moving forward.

MR MILLIGAN: With the event that just passed in January, is there any possibility that Defence Relief Australia could provide a report to the government on what type of resilience may need to be implemented and worked on to prevent something like this from happening again, or the severity of this happening again?

Mr Young: I can certainly talk to the executives in the organisation and see whether or not that is a possible option. Certainly, one of the challenges we find is that obviously different types of natural disasters have different amounts of warnings and so on. With a storm we often find that it comes with fairly minimal warning and often it goes as quickly as it comes. Sometimes we see that storm events end up being substantially more intense than what was predicted or they intensify very rapidly. A very variable kind of situation can occur and it is not easily predictable.

Things like bushfires and floods are in many ways far more predictable. There is often more you can do in that kind of scenario. Typically, if you think about the aftermath of what occurred, we see lots of downed trees and things of that nature. It is a case of, if we look at the aftermath, is there anything that we can do now, ahead of time, to minimise the impact of that damage in future or constrain that to certain locations or areas?

MR PETTERSSON: What sorts of fees do Disaster Relief Australia charge for their services?

Mr Young: For the home owners and the end users, zero. There is no expectation of being paid by home owners. For us to man an operation, where we deploy people on the ground and so on, it can be quite an expensive exercise. To date we have relied upon donations, grants and other support and sponsorship to do so. That can cost in the vicinity of $50,000 a week if we have a large team on the ground that require everything to do their job.

What we would normally do with local government organisations—and we do this all around the country at a state and local level—is have MOUs in place for cost recovery and so on. For example, prior to the northern New South Wales flooding we did a lot of work with Moreton Bay Council and Brisbane and Gold Coast councils to manage all of their teams of spontaneous volunteers.

Often what happens is that people literally come out of the woodwork to help out. It is just the community helping the community. Often there is no coordination and so on. We have all of these people that are willing to lend a hand, but there is no-one to help them identify priorities or what needs to be done or to organise the troops. That is the space that we work in with local government, particularly in Queensland and other parts of the country. That is a cost recovery, fee-for-service kind of arrangement.

Along with other parts of the world, we are also working on a similar kind of model. For example, with the bushfires on the South Coast, we had some cost recovery funding through Resilience New South Wales. They covered fuel, accommodation and some catering and other things like that for our people while we were on the ground. That was purely a cost recovery. The biggest constraint that we have in that space, and what often brings us to a close, is the funding to support the operation; that is a big one.

MR PETTERSSON: The government did not pick up the phone and call you following the storm. Did you contact ACT government in the aftermath of the storm?

Mr Young: I made contact with individuals in different organisations that I had contact with. Obviously, they are a little down the pecking order there. The challenge we currently run into is that we are not written into the ACT emergency plan, so we have no authority or status within the ACT. Without that formal status it means that we cannot activate and mobilise volunteers. They cannot access volunteer days under the Fair Work Act. We recommend that that be written into the act. That will enable us to be engaged and activated.

One of the limitations we run into is that, whilst we have insurances and all of those sorts of things, particularly in the acute phase emergency services are doing their thing. We are very happy to work with SES, RFS, ESA and organisations more broadly—and I have had meetings with those organisations in the past—but we have not yet reached the point where we have been able to actually put anything practical or formal in place.

MR PETTERSSON: I just want to clarify: in the low-level engagements you had was the answer, "You're not already registered; you're not pre-approved," or was it, "We don't want your service right now; we don't need it"?

Mr Young: The general comment was that obviously this is an SES thing, or whatever-organisation-it-is thing. Without any formal thing in place, you sit on the bench, basically. That was largely the general comment. There appeared to be a substantial amount of work. Standing on the outside looking in, there appeared to be a lot more work and a lot more jobs and tasks that needed to be done than there were people available. I think we have seen that manifest in things like resolving damaged trees. That has been going on for months and is predicted to go on for some time yet. Clearly, there is a resource limitation there. As I say, we were available, but we did not get a call.

THE CHAIR: The recommendation you make, that you be included as a support organisation in the ACT emergency plan—is there any subnational government in the country, state or local government, that has included DRA in their emergency plan or a not dissimilar document?

Mr Young: I believe Western Australia. I think there are at least two other states; I just cannot recall which states. We are written into the emergency plans in other states, and that is obviously at the state level. In terms of local government, we have been working closely with numerous local governments. We often have in place MOUs around a discrete function, be that spontaneous volunteers or coordination of certain activities. Depending on the level of government, it has been enacted through different mechanisms.

In addition to that, there is funding. As I mentioned before, Resilience New South Wales has provided funding for us on a cost recovery basis through the local government organisations to do that work. We have also received funding and grants through what was previously the Bushfire Recovery Agency, the national agency, and then Veterans' Affairs.

THE CHAIR: On behalf of the committee, we thank you for taking the time to appear today and for your written submission. Over the coming days you will be sent a copy of the *Hansard* proof transcript. You can flick over that and let us know if there are any inaccuracies. If there is any more information in relation to the context or the conversation today that you think would inform the committee's work, it would be ideal if we could get that at some point in the next week before we commence writing our report.

Short suspension.

BILLING, MR PETER, General Manager, Evoenergy
DAVIS, MS ALISON, Strategy Lead, Evoenergy

THE CHAIR: Welcome back to the public hearing of the Standing Committee on Health and Community Wellbeing inquiry into the west Belconnen supercell thunderstorm event. Can you acknowledge that you have read and understood the pink privilege statement which sits to your right? I remind all witnesses of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege as part of that statement.

Ms Davis: I have read and acknowledge the privilege statement.

Mr Billing: I have read and understood the privilege statement.

THE CHAIR: Thank you both very much. Would you like to start with an opening statement?

Mr Billing: Yes, we would.

THE CHAIR: We would appreciate that.

Mr Billing: Thank you for the opportunity to speak to our submission this afternoon. The severe storm that swept through north-western Canberra on 3 January 2022 at approximately 5 pm caused serious and extensive damage to Evoenergy's electricity network assets. Damage from the storm resulted in a loss of electricity supply to more than 21,000 customers in the Molonglo Valley, Belconnen and Gungahlin. The scale of damage caused by this storm to our overhead electricity network was equivalent to the damage of the 2003 bushfires.

In the first few hours and into the night, Evoenergy crews restored electricity supply to more than 18,000 customers. During the following six days, supply was gradually restored to all customers initially impacted, with the exception of a small number of customers who required private contractors to repair internal damage.

The storm caused damage to more than 550 electrical assets. With the assistance of supplementary crews from Endeavour Energy, 190 service lines were replaced, 50 powerlines restrung and 20 crossarms and 11 power poles replaced. Our focus during this time was working as quickly and as safely as possible to return supply to our customers and replace damaged assets. The safety of our staff and the community is always our first priority.

Throughout the event our staff actively contributed to the multi-agency operational response run by the Emergency Services Agency at the Fairbairn facility. From the time we assessed the severity of our network damage until the final household was restored, we were proactively providing information and updates to the emergency control room.

Evoenergy is highly experienced in managing emergencies and planned outages. We have trained and prepared crews ready to respond. Our staffing numbers continue to increase to meet the increasing demands of the growing Canberra community and the

changing environment. However, we can always learn from events like these and we know we can always be doing better to serve the community.

The intensity and the frequency of storm events are increasing, and we are committed to ensuring that we can adapt and respond effectively to our changing climate and environment. We are committed to working with the ACT government and emergency support agencies to effectively collaborate on managing the risk of major damage to our network through our three key strategies.

The first is prevention. Most of the damage we experienced to our distribution network during the storm was due to fallen trees and branches bringing down powerlines, poles and other electricity distribution assets. Evoenergy knows that Canberra is the bush capital. It is recognised for its native trees and green streets. However, this environment presents a major risk to our overhead network assets. We would welcome a partnership with the Transport Canberra and City Services Directorate to educate the community about proactive vegetation management and to identify trees near overhead powerlines that can be removed or replaced with more suitable species.

The second is detection. We know that there are opportunities to improve the way Evoenergy responds during storm events in the future, including providing more timely, frequent and effective communications to our customers. We received extensive feedback from residents impacted by the storm that they want to be notified via SMS when we detect power interruptions within our network. As a result, we are upgrading our systems to introduce an SMS notification for unplanned outages to ensure Canberrans have the latest information about power supply at their property.

Finally, response. We are committed to reviewing and improving how we respond to storms. This includes proactively communicating with those affected by power outages and ensuring we are aligned with other agencies in our approach to prioritise public safety before restoring power supply. A key action identified in our post-incident review of this event was to evaluate the accreditation requirements for ACT emergency services to allow them to work near our network safely during storms. This work is currently underway.

The scale of the damage caused to our overhead electricity network was the worst we have seen since the 2003 bushfires. Whilst this type of storm damage is not common, we know the intensity and the frequency of events like this is expected to increase in future. We welcome inquiries like this to ensure that we are reflecting on how we can better support the Canberra community as we face these challenges.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. Forgive me if I ask some questions that might seem silly or assume knowledge, but I think providing a bit of context for those at home and those watching this conversation is really important. Can you explain to me the difference with and the relationship between yourselves as the energy distributor and separate energy retailers, who I understand many who were affected by the storm may have felt the need to contact in the first instance when there was a power outage?

Mr Billing: Evoenergy owns and operates the poles and wires, whether that is overhead or underground. We operate all of that network. We are also the gas network

operator and owner in the ACT. Our responsibility is to respond to fault events. A retailer is purely the business that purchases electricity and then sells that back to customers and provides retail services with respect to supporting customers about their bills and so on. The actual fault response should always come to Evoenergy.

THE CHAIR: Just to be very clear: should somebody be suffering from a power outage, they should contact you first, not their retailer?

Mr Billing: That is correct.

THE CHAIR: In instances where that does not happen, and you imagine in an emergency situation you probably reach for the first phone number available to you—in my instance, it is the bill that is on the magnet on the fridge from my retailer—what is the process for you to work with the retailers to make sure that there is a clear line of communication when someone calls their retailer and says, "I have a power outage"?

Mr Billing: What would normally happen is the retailer would ask you to call our number. They have our number available to them regardless of which retailer you are with. They should just ask you to pass on. They do not pass the information direct to us.

THE CHAIR: A slightly spicy question, again just to make it clear: if an energy consumer felt they were disappointed with the response from Evoenergy and how quickly it took for energy to come back on, because you own the infrastructure that separate retailers are using to manage these accounts, there would not be an option in that instance, to be frank, for a consumer to take their business elsewhere, would there? You are the only person who can get energy to these homes.

Mr Billing: That is correct. We are a monopoly provider as such, yes.

THE CHAIR: That makes sense.

MR MILLIGAN: Obviously, during this whole emergency communication was an issue with a lot of residents. Some of the information that came through that communication, according to residents, was inaccurate and whatnot. My question is not around that; my question is around your method of communication. I am just wanting to know what methods of communication you used and what other forms of communication you considered but did not use, given that electricity and power are a big contributor to how you communicate with someone.

Mr Billing: We used all forms of social media. That does, as you are suggesting, rely on people having a device that is powered still. We did use those methods, but we also did a number of press releases and radio interviews, so we used that medium. We also had people attend the community hub run by ESA to be able to provide information, and we have registered life support customers that we did outbound phone calls to.

MR MILLIGAN: Did you consider a letterbox drop or doorknocking as a form of communication?

Mr Billing: We certainly did not consider doorknocking. We do not have the staff to be able to do that. Our primary response was being able to respond to that. I will pass to Alison on the other part of that question.

Ms Davis: We did not consider a letterbox drop, mainly because of the intense nature of staffing in having someone out to do a drop, but our field crews were talking to residents and some of our office-based staff were also out talking to customers and checking in with crews.

MR MILLIGAN: Did you provide any feedback or advice to the government suggesting that maybe some form of letterbox drop or doorknocking should go out in terms of better communication?

Mr Billing: No, we did not make that suggestion.

THE CHAIR: Anecdotally, the evidence the committee has received so far would suggest to me that those who have had a worse experience are those who are a combination of older Canberrans or would be self-described as not being particularly tech-savvy, so arguably people who would have responded well to either someone physically coming to their home or providing some written materials. Ms Davis, in the example you just used about letterbox distribution, obviously it would be quite onerous if you sent staff out to do that. As a member of parliament, I distribute a newsletter quarterly to my electorate through Australia Post. I know it is costly, but it can be done. Is that something that was considered?

Ms Davis: It was not. The context I would provide is how quickly the information was changing. A letterbox drop would be a starting point in time and if that took a day or two to get out to the residents, the information may have changed by then. Certainly, after the fact we have gone out to survey our customers to understand what methods of communication they would like us to communicate with them and what we could have done better. That included making sure we could capture customers' feedback by contacting them via a letter.

THE CHAIR: Is that survey completed and have you already been able to reflect on its full findings?

Ms Davis: Absolutely.

THE CHAIR: Is that a public document?

Ms Davis: Not at this point in time. It is something that we are using to inform the decisions that we make in how we communicate with our customers and what methods they prefer to hear from us, particularly in events like the storm and the aftermath—so in those major events, as well as unplanned power interruptions and more business-as-usual type activities where customers would want information.

Mr Billing: We actually sent out a request to all the customers that were off for the extended period of time—

Ms Davis: 2,751 customers.

Mr Billing: Like all surveys, you only get a certain response rate. We have offered that to all those customers that were off for the extended period of time and have then looked to evaluate the feedback we have got back.

MR PETTERSSON: It is in the submission that you average about 380 calls a week. What is the wait time on your phone service normally?

Ms Davis: Generally not very long. For a specific time, I would have to take that on notice. Generally, customers are getting through to us and within 30 seconds they will be talking to a customer service officer.

MR PETTERSSON: During the week after the storm, there was a 1,200 per cent increase in calls. Do you have any indication as to what the average wait time blew out to during that period?

Ms Davis: I would have to take that on notice to give you the specific average wait time.

MR PETTERSSON: That would be appreciated. Did you increase the number of staff taking phone calls during that time?

Ms Davis: Certainly. When we have events like this we have ramp-up plans so that we can ensure that we are staffing the contact centre to receive the calls consistently, because it is for an extended period of time. We make sure that we are also monitoring fatigue of all our staff. We did have calls being handled by our core contact centre staff as well as some of our staff from customer service so that they could provide some of that support as well.

MR PETTERSSON: Would there be some figure you could point to as to how much you scaled up those phone services?

Ms Davis: For an actual figure, I would have to take that on notice.

MR PETTERSSON: If you could just take on notice how many people you had answering the phone during that period, that would be helpful.

Ms Davis: Sure.

Mr Billing: If I could just clarify that there will be a difference between after hours and during hours. It would be in the business hours that we would provide when you are going to get the most volume of calls. So daytime, I guess, is what I am saying, more so than into the evening.

MR PETTERSSON: That is fair enough.

Mr Billing: And that lines up with the normal pattern of call volumes.

MR PETTERSSON: The more info you can give us, the better. Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Ms Davis, you spoke about the ramp-up process. I am interested in a bit more context about how that works. Is that bringing on new staff on short-term contracts? Is that employing a third-party provider to take calls and provide advice? Is that moving people from other parts of your business into the call centre so they can take calls? How does that manifest itself?

Ms Davis: It is all managed in-house. We have plans in place where we are able to ramp up normal staffing for our contact centre officers in response to events that happen on the network that customers require information on. We also have staff in other parts of the business and we funnel calls that are not related to the emergency out to those staff members to free up our emergency contact centre staff to respond to those calls.

THE CHAIR: That is good.

MR PETTERSSON: Regarding the phone calls, one of the recurring things that I picked up from the evidence was that people would call in wanting an update on when their power would be restored and seemingly they were not satisfied with the information they got. Basically, they have told us that there was not, seemingly, an awareness of when their power would be restored. Was there a central plan of works that staff at Evoenergy could tell people, "Your street is planned to be fixed two days from now"?

Ms Davis: There certainly was a plan for work. When responding to an event like this, things need to be adjusted based on what our crews find when they are out on the field. We will always prioritise safety. That means that sometimes things will get moved around to make sure that we are addressing safety issues as a priority. There was absolutely a list that was generated and updated on a regular basis, and that would move about based on what we were finding out on the field.

MR PETTERSSON: Could we get a copy of what that list would look like? Does that exist in some digestible form that the committee could look at—a long list of jobs to be done?

Ms Davis: We would have to check on the privacy implications of sharing that from customers' addresses and details like that through the list. We can take that on notice.

Mr Billing: One of the challenges in being very definitive around "Is the property at 27 Whatever Street going to be tomorrow or the next day," is the number of trees that are over powerlines and the ability to access certain backyards. There are examples where our staff actually had to walk through the home of a property owner to get access to our assets. Those sorts of things will certainly change your plan. You are going to focus on working on this area and getting customers back, and then you find that you get delayed in that area but you can make some bigger gain. That is intelligence that we build up as we get further into the response. It is very hard to be definitive early; the further you get in, the more definitive you can be, because you have got a full scope of the level of damage and the issues associated with accessing particular properties.

MR PETTERSSON: That being said, it might be useful if you could potentially give

us some examples of how that job list changed over time. How many Evoenergy crews are there working to restore power on day one of an incident like this?

Mr Billing: One of the challenges on 3 January was that our organisation, similar to others, had a number of staff away. Like most Canberrans, a lot of our people head to the coast or head to other places, but we do maintain minimum levels of staff. Alison, do you know exactly how many were available during that time?

Ms Davis: I will get my time line.

Mr Billing: Quite frequently, as happened in this case, staff that are actually on leave and are not away call in to say that they are available. We have quite often spoken to a number of staff beforehand to verify, if they are around Canberra, if we can call on them.

MR PETTERSSON: How many crews would you have, in general?

Mr Billing: We have about 160 field staff in total.

MR PETTERSSON: That is field staff. How many make up a crew?

Mr Billing: That will depend on the work. It will be anywhere from two, three to five, depending on the sort of work that they might be undertaking.

Ms Davis: I will take on notice the exact number of crews that we had available on the evening of the 3rd.

MR PETTERSSON: That would be very helpful. How many Endeavour Energy supplementary crews came in?

Mr Billing: There were 21 in total.

Ms Davis: Twenty-one staff members in total.

Mr Billing: Again, that would depend on the work. In that number they had two supervisory staff and a support person, which we would normally recommend if we were sending crews. It is much better if they come with a degree of support because they understand their own requirements and it makes it easier to make them more efficient if they have that sort of support with them.

MR PETTERSSON: It makes sense. Could you take on notice how many field staff you had working over each day of the week following the storm?

Mr Billing: Sure.

MR PETTERSSON: Thank you.

THE CHAIR: I would like to talk about trees because that is on brand for a Greens MLA, isn't it? It takes up a large part of your submission—in particular where you start with the recommendations. I want to pick up on one line here about working with

the ACT government and Transport Canberra and City Services to educate about the benefits of proactive vegetation management. It goes on to state:

> Evoenergy also maintains a hazard tree register where we are able to identify trees that are in poor health, and the size and proximity of the trees—

et cetera. I am interested in that because, as a local member, I am regularly contacted by constituents who would like to do away with a tree because it is causing some sort of problem. But, as you would know, the ACT government is committed to an urban tree canopy. How does your hazard tree register intersect with some of the government's commitments under that urban tree canopy? Are there trees that you are classifying as a hazard that are not fitting neatly into what the government is trying to achieve with its urban tree canopy?

Mr Billing: I would take that at a high level first. I would suggest they probably clash most of the time, because if you are looking to remove a tree then that would be counter to that broader expansion. It is more about health and danger risk associated with that. We would always respect the judgment of ACT government around whether the tree should or should not be removed. We raise it as a risk and a concern, from that perspective, but we put that forward under those circumstances. If it is agreed that it is the right thing to remove that tree, it is removed and then replaced. It is very much a process where you are always trying to balance the two competing agendas. As long as you have the right debate about it, you will, hopefully, normally get the right answer.

THE CHAIR: How many trees across the ACT has Evoenergy identified in, let's say, the last 12 months or the last financial year, or in your last reporting period, as qualifying for the hazard tree register?

Mr Billing: I would have to take that on notice.

THE CHAIR: It might be an on-notice question, but can you explain to me the process? Once you have identified a tree that goes on that hazard tree register, who do you call in the ACT government to let them know you have now classified this tree as a hazard?

Mr Billing: Have you got that detail, Alison?

Ms Davis: I do not think I have that specifically. We could take that on notice.

THE CHAIR: All right. I would be interested in understanding more about the process. I would also be interested in knowing, again, of all the hazard trees that you have registered, have you informed the government that you have registered them?

Mr Billing: Yes.

THE CHAIR: I would also be interested in getting a figure as to how many times you have been told by the government, even though you have identified this tree to be registered, that we will not be removing it or reducing its size. That would be an interesting figure to know as well.

Mr Billing: Sure.

THE CHAIR: Are you willing to take all of those on notice?

Mr Billing: Yes.

THE CHAIR: Great. Thank you.

MR MILLIGAN: Just to confirm: in your opening statement did you say that Evoenergy is undergoing a review currently or has completed a review of the disaster event in January?

Mr Billing: Yes. We did a post-incident review, and we have completed that. We have loaded all the allocated action items. Some of that work will take a little bit longer—by the time we get to the next storm season, so by 1 October. They will allocate it out to look to improve our processes and our systems.

MR MILLIGAN: Is that review publicly available or is it all internal?

Mr Billing: It is just an internal review.

MR MILLIGAN: An internal review?

Mr Billing: Yes. We did use an internal but independent team to do that. Then we surveyed all of our staff that were involved, as well as customers, around what they thought about actions.

MR MILLIGAN: Given that it is not a public document, I do not necessarily expect you to answer this. Can you say what some of the key areas that were identified in this review you are working towards improving on?

Mr Billing: They are really the same sorts of questions that you were asking about in relation to the ability to look at tree-cutting processes and improve that piece with TCSS. We are able to do that. We are also looking at what we can do from a customer perspective. We have also heard the feedback around people being concerned that they have not heard the right information at the right time and through the media, so there are actions around that as well. There is also a bit around how we pull together our plan. We felt that we could do that better in future. As we indicated in our submission, this is the biggest equivalent event since 2003 on which we have been tested. There were things that we saw that we could improve on out of that as well.

MR MILLIGAN: Is your time frame within the next six months?

Mr Billing: Yes. The vast majority of those actions will be completed by 1 October so that we are ready for the nominal next storm season.

MR PETTERSSON: I know that a lot of the problems experienced by the electricity network are a combination of big trees and powerlines. What would it take for the ACT to move our electricity network underground?

Mr Billing: On average, and this is very much an average, underground powerlines are around three times the cost of overhead powerlines, so there is a significant financial impact to achieve that. The intricacy with the ACT network is the backyard reticulation. It would mean removing it out of backyards and then putting underground in the streetscape. Depending on where you gain access—either in the verge or in the roadway, depending on where access is available—we would put what we call a pillar in the intersection of two blocks. We would need customers to be prepared to bring their own customer mains out to that point. So there is quite a bit involved in replacing overhead with underground, and it is quite an expensive exercise.

MR PETTERSSON: Is that something that should be considered here in the ACT, if events like this are going to continue to happen?

Mr Billing: Evoenergy is a regulated business. If we were to do a program like that it would be funded out of general revenue, in effect. It would not be directly attributed to each individual customer. You would have to go to a street and say, "This is what we're looking to do. You're going to be up for the costs of your own part of that," and then the rest of the costs we would pick up. That would be borne by all ACT customers. The Australian Energy Regulator would look at that and say, "Is that a prudent and efficient use of customers' money?" because that would potentially mean bills would go up to compensate for that. They would make that determination. I would suggest they would most likely not agree that that was prudent, but that would have to be tested.

MR PETTERSSON: We have an event like this happen, poles and wires come down, we then go and put poles and wires back up—

Mr Billing: Yes.

MR PETTERSSON: and wait for it to happen again. Is that the crux of the situation?

Mr Billing: We are certainly replacing, nominally, like with like. In some cases, we are changing the configuration to bring it to a more modern standard at the same time. Certainly, overhead conductors and poles are being brought down and poles and overhead conductors are being put back up; that is correct.

MR PETTERSSON: Right. So is there a tipping point where we need to—

Mr Billing: I would strongly suggest it is not in an event like this. If you think about it, the reality is that whilst it took us six days to get into backyards and put it back up again, if we then had to trench out into the street and have customers relocate out to that point, those customers would have been off for a significantly longer period. There is only one answer in an actual event and that is to replace like for like because of the trenching, pulling cable and doing all the jointing. That would have been weeks. It is that sort of time frame for this volume of customers. It needs to be a decision that is taken and enacted on as not a storm event but as a project in its own right.

MR MILLIGAN: Can there be a mix between poles, overhead wires and also

underground? What can that mix look like? Is it easy enough to do? Can you maybe, let's say, focus on areas out in the community where the poles are in a situation where they could be at high risk again of trees falling on them? Could you put them underground to remove that potential risk?

Mr Billing: It is a balance of the costs associated with the repairs, how frequent they are and the likelihood of the same areas being hit over and again. We would have to go into the broader case around why you would do it. There are certainly circumstances where there might be a brownfields development that has caused the lines to be upgraded. That may well drive that underground piece that goes beyond that specific customer. There have certainly been examples of that in recent history where a new development has insignificantly increased the required capacity and the need for additional works, and that has been taken into account about what we can do.

I do not want to use the word "issue", but one of the nuances of the way it is framed in the ACT is that because customers are responsible for the costs associated with the clearing of trees, to give that clearance around the trees, that is not actually a cost that is borne by us as the provider. In other jurisdictions, where the provider has that responsibility as well, you can consider the cost of maintaining tree clearance in the broader business case around undergrounding. But in our case that is not a cost that we bear. We bear the cost of informing the customer that they have a requirement, but we do not bear the cost of tree cutting.

MR MILLIGAN: Cost aside, it can be done through?

Mr Billing: Physically—

MR MILLIGAN: In risky areas, let's say—

Mr Billing: Electrically, it can be done.

MR MILLIGAN: It can be done.

Mr Billing: And physically it can be done.

MR MILLIGAN: It sounds like that Evoenergy would bear all the cost to change that infrastructure. Is ACT government at all responsible or obliged to also put in funding for this type of upgrade?

Mr Billing: No, they are not. As a regulated business—so the Evoenergy side of ActewAGL—we do not operate any unregulated activities. We are purely a regulated business. We are ring fence associated; we actually have a requirement not to try and raise money in any other way. All of our funds come from customer bills. As I said, that is regulated by the Australian Energy Regulator. If we were to allocate, say, $20 million a year, for example, to underground suburbs, it would be at the expense of not doing other work, unless the AER specifically allocated funds for that work.

MR MILLIGAN: And that cannot come from government—those funds?

Mr Billing: I would really have to take that question on notice as to how that might be

dealt with. That is a regulatory question that is probably beyond me in answering off the top of my head.

MR MILLIGAN: Sure.

Mr Billing: We can certainly ask that question.

MR MILLIGAN: Great.

THE CHAIR: I have a supplementary on that, which the two members from Yerrabi might know the answer to, given Gungahlin is a much newer area than my area down in Tuggeranong. Are we doing underground power to our new suburbs currently?

Mr Billing: Yes.

THE CHAIR: Right. So we have made the decision, it would appear—both Evoenergy and the government—that, knowing what we know now, that is a better model for energy distribution in the long term?

Mr Billing: It is also aesthetics. If you had two developers developing separate subdivisions and one had overhead powerlines and one had underground, the cost of the block would be more expensive. Regardless of whether it is overhead going in greenfields or underground, the underground is still more expensive. But I do not think people would buy blocks if our electricity assets were not underground.

THE CHAIR: Can I get some clarity about who pays that cost? I imagine that you are approached by government and they say, "We've got this nice big new suburb," usually out Gungahlin way: "that we want to develop. We want you to roll out the infrastructure. We want the infrastructure to be underground." Who bears the cost at that point?

Mr Billing: Ultimately, the developer bears the cost of that.

THE CHAIR: Which would be, in these instances, the Suburban Land Agency.

MR PETTERSSON: Who then pass the cost on too.

THE CHAIR: Yes, who would then pass the cost on. And that is where you are referencing the cost of blocks?

Mr Billing: Yes. Regardless of whether it is the Suburban Land Agency or a private developer, and pretty much anywhere in Australia, what happens is that the cost just gets built into the block. When you are looking for a block of land, it is the cost of the block of land and services are underground, so as a person purchasing the land you do not really see it as a cost. It is purely at the cost of the development.

THE CHAIR: That makes sense; thank you.

MR PETTERSSON: How are your service reliability targets tracking after the storm?

Mr Billing: At the moment we have two targets—one for frequency and one for duration. With duration, we are missing our target at the moment. Not only the 3 January storm but also the storms back in December have contributed towards that. With frequency events, we are doing okay on that. This goes to the point we made in our submission, in that the severity of storms is getting worse. I am sure the committee sees that as well. It is taking longer to repair because the severity of the storm means there is additional damage, and that damage is to our powerlines. Predominantly, even in the highest wind events, powerlines do not come down unless they are actually hit by a windborne object—a tree coming over, roof iron or whatever it might be.

MR PETTERSSON: What are the repercussions for Evoenergy in not meeting its service reliability targets?

Mr Billing: We face a penalty in reduced revenue in future years, associated with not meeting those targets. So we are incentivised to ensure that we take action to look at that.

MR PETTERSSON: On a slightly different line of questioning, in terms of Evoenergy accountability to Canberra residents, you report to Icon Water, and Icon Water would then report to the ACT government. Have you enjoyed coming along to our hearing today?

Mr Billing: Firstly, on a point of clarity, we are jointly owned by ACT government, through Icon Water, and Jemena. We are exactly 50 per cent owned by both. I think we asked if we could come along; so, yes, we have enjoyed coming along. We think this is a valuable exercise.

MR PETTERSSON: Would you like to do it again at some time?

Mr Billing: More than happy to.

MR PETTERSSON: Wonderful; thank you.

Mr Billing: We feel we can contribute to the broader community, and we are very happy to be here and to take questions. I apologise that we have not been able to answer all of the questions without taking some on notice, but we are more than happy to be here.

MR MILLIGAN: With power being out for a lengthy period of time, and with loss of food and other items, was any compensation offered to local residents? What could they actually claim compensation on?

Mr Billing: Predominantly, compensation was not available. There are two things that can happen. If the event is beyond our reasonable control, which this sort of event is, under the—

Ms Davis: The Consumer Protection Code.

Mr Billing: Yes, under the Consumer Protection Code we are not obligated to pay out when we are not liable. We cannot be held accountable for something that is reasonably beyond our control. If our assets failed and we knew there was something that could cause our assets to fail—a component in the network that was faulty, we had a history of it and we had failed to deal with it—we would absolutely be liable to pay out on that, or where we have directly contributed. But under that Consumer Protection Code we are not liable to pay out.

MR MILLIGAN: Who does that assessment? Who decides whether or not you are liable?

Mr Billing: It is a two-stage process. The first stage is that we make that determination, but we put all of this data to the ICRC, and they review on a yearly basis to ensure that we have got it right.

MR MILLIGAN: So you present that to them and they make the call?

Mr Billing: Yes.

MR MILLIGAN: That is the process that you went through in January?

Mr Billing: We will go through that; each year we do that. We put back—

MR MILLIGAN: So you have not gone through it yet?

Mr Billing: No, I do not believe so.

MR MILLIGAN: Does that mean potentially they may come back and say compensation could be given?

Mr Billing: I think we are at a point where we have a very good understanding of when we should and when we should not. Any time we have any doubt, we contact the ICRC to talk it through with them before we make a final call.

MR MILLIGAN: Did you do that for this recent event? Did you contact them for that clarification?

Ms Davis: Certainly, informal conversations occurred, and it informed Evoenergy's decisions around how we applied the Consumer Protection Code in this instance.

MR MILLIGAN: Should they have been informal or should they have been official conversations? How does that stack up? Should it be official in this situation?

Ms Davis: Certainly, when we provide our data at the end of the year, we would go through that formal process. In this instance, the storm that occurred fell within our understanding of the Consumer Protection Code. With the causes, this type of event is outside our reasonable control. Contributing to that, it is classed as a major event by the Australian Energy Regulator, and that is the information that we used to make those decisions.

Mr Billing: It is actually not in our interest to make a wrong call. We could certainly make a wrong call, but it is not in our interest. We would always err on the conservative side and confirm with the ICRC. I think it is reasonable to say that they are comfortable that we would make an informal approach; then their advice would be for us to put it in writing, to make it formal, if they felt there was any doubt.

MR MILLIGAN: In terms of the time it took to restore power, what were the contributing factors behind that? Why did it take up to four or five days to restore power?

Mr Billing: It is the complexity of the event—the amount of trees that were down, the fact that it was in a backyard, and our ability to access all of those areas, all the way through. Having said that, we are looking at what we could do differently to be more effective if we have a similar event in the future.

MR MILLIGAN: Did you call on the ACT government, potentially, to provide you with additional resources or assistance to help to get that power on quickly?

Mr Billing: I will defer to Alison on that, but there is limited ability for the ACT government to help. Most of the work is powerline work, and you need appropriate qualifications for that and it is very much industry based. But there would be other areas where we could do that.

Ms Davis: Certainly, we did call on other energy distributors. Endeavour Energy came in and supported us with that work that required qualified electrical distribution workers. We certainly worked closely with the SES and the emergency services in regard to planning ahead for clearing of trees to allow access, where we had crews working in tandem with tree-cutting crews from the ESA.

MR MILLIGAN: Hypothetically, in this situation, if Disaster Relief Australia were called into this situation and were able to lend assistance, particularly to remove debris, could that have sped up the process to bring the power back on?

Mr Billing: Depending on the access arrangements, yes, it could have.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Davis and Mr Billing, for your time this afternoon. We appreciate it, and thank you for your written submission. You have taken a fair few questions on notice, mostly from me. I would appreciate it if you could liaise with the committee secretary to get those answers through to us. Equally, we will send you a copy of the proof transcript of today's hearing, so there will be an opportunity to correct for accuracy, if there are any problems. Thank you both very much for your time, and have a good afternoon.

Short suspension.

DAVIDSON, MS EMMA, Assistant Minister for Families and Community Services, Minister for Disability, Minister for Justice Health, Minister for Mental Health and Minister for Veterans and Seniors
CORRIGAN, MR JIM, Acting Director-General, Transport Canberra and City Services
WOOD, MS JO, Acting Director-General, Community Services Directorate
GLENN, MR RICHARD, Director-General, Justice and Community Safety Directorate
JONES, MR JASON, Acting Commissioner, Emergency Services Agency, Justice and Community Safety Directorate
ROGERS, MS TAMERRA, Executive Branch Manager, Communications and Engagement, Chief Minister, Treasury and Economic Development Directorate

THE CHAIR: Welcome to today's hearing of the Standing Committee on Health and Community Wellbeing inquiry into the west Belconnen supercell storm. Please take the time to read and subsequently acknowledge the privilege statement that is on pink paper to the right of each person appearing today.

Minister, I will give you the opportunity to provide an opening statement, if you wish.

Ms Davidson: Thank you. I will try and keep this very brief, because I am sure you all have a lot of questions. I acknowledge the privilege statement.

I am glad that we are having this conversation today, because while we are talking today about the supercell event that happened in January this year, there is a lot for us to learn from this experience that we have had, as well as the experiences that we had in community recovery from lockdown during COVID last year and from the bushfires in 2019-20. This adds to the body of knowledge and experience that we have about how we deal with natural disasters in the ACT that has been continually developed over many years and after many difficult experiences as a community.

The reason why this is so important is that, with the impacts of climate change, we will see more frequent natural disaster events, and they will be less predictable and more intense. The lessons that we are learning from each of these experiences will become much more important so that we can rapidly integrate them into how we respond to future incidents.

It is really good that we are having this conversation today and that we are thinking not just about what happened with that particular storm event but about the processes that we put in place for communications, for how we look after people and for how we prioritise what we respond to and when we respond to it, in the context of knowing that we might need to apply that to all kinds of different natural disasters in future.

THE CHAIR: I will ask the first question. At the risk of being spicy, can I say that, as delighted as I am to see you, Minister, I feel that, based on reading the submissions and chairing the inquiry so far today, it may have been valuable to hear today from the minister for territory and municipal services. My line of questioning will be particularly on the clean-up, as that seemed to be the issue raised in the bulk of our submissions and the bulk of the evidence that we have heard today. I want to pick up

on point 27 in the government's response. I will read from it:

> TCCS recalled staff from annual leave to assist in the storm response which included clearing trees and debris from roads, footpaths, driveways and nature strips as well repairing …

I have a bold question. Is it the government's view that there are currently enough full-time equivalent positions in TCCS for suburban municipal maintenance and emergency relief, such as what we have experienced in west Belconnen?

Ms Davidson: Before I pass over to Jim Corrigan, who will talk more about what it takes to provide an adequate operational response and whether we have the right resourcing levels to be able to do that, it is also important to consider the context in which we were having to respond to this particular storm event. This came on the back of a period of a couple of years of constantly having to respond to the clean-ups of the bushfire—and that was a huge amount of work—as well as the hailstorm event that occurred. We had this January supercell event following that. There were a lot of staff who had not had the opportunity to take leave literally for years.

When we are thinking about how we respond to these things and what kind of resourcing we need, we also have to take into account that you cannot necessarily predict when and how frequently these events will occur, and whether people will have a chance to rest and recover in between those events, and plan for the next storm season before that starts. I will pass over to Mr Corrigan to talk about resourcing needs.

Mr Corrigan: Whilst we would always welcome extra resources, it is a difficult thing for the government to manage. As the minister touched on, in the response from TCCS, a number of areas were involved. Our tree unit, our urban trees team, were heavily involved. Our roads people were involved, with the sweepers—the trucks that go around doing the sweeping. Our waste people were involved, because we organised extra green waste pickups, and things like that. Our city presentation crews also assisted the tree teams with the clean-up; our people qualified to use chainsaws, and the arborists, were doing all of the chopping. A lot of other people came in to assist. We also asked the Parks and Conservation Service, from EPSDD, for help, and they jumped in and helped us as well.

It was an extraordinary event. The amount of individual jobs that we attended to was more than double what we normally do for all of Belconnen for one year. That puts it into perspective. We have enough resources, generally, throughout what we manage, but that was a unique event, and that is why we called in extra ones.

THE CHAIR: I asked that question—and I am sure it is the same for my fellow committee members; speak up if it is not—because, as local members, at least one in every 10 emails I get is something related to your area of work, Mr Corrigan—suburban and city maintenance, beautification et cetera. I am interested in any reflections that the directorate has on the pressures that are created in other parts of the ACT when these staff have been deployed to do this huge amount of work in west Belconnen, and what delays that has created across the system for that kind of work in other parts of the territory.

Mr Corrigan: It has definitely created a domino effect through other parts of the territory, because we have had to move so many crews to respond. But we always triage the work and the requests that come in. Safety is always our number one priority. It does not matter where it is in Canberra; we will deal with safety first, and the amenity after that. That is what we have done. We have triaged those requests that have come through. But there has been a backlog created because of the response to the January storm, and we are managing through that.

Ms Davidson: When you consider that there were something like 4,250 requests that came in, relating to things like trees being down and that sort of thing, while it took a while for them to be completed, they were able to prioritise the ones that were the greatest safety hazard and safety risk, and get those done quickly. If it takes a little bit longer for some of the others to get done, where it is not creating a safety hazard, the priority is about making sure that people are safe first. There is a considerable amount of work just in doing that.

THE CHAIR: I agree. At the risk of editorialising, I suppose that is why I asked the question about whether or not we have our staffing composition right. While it is true and expected that safety would always be prioritised, there are probably other municipal services that ratepayers expect that are being delayed, or potentially not completed at all, when we take care of these challenges.

My final question to you, Mr Corrigan, is around those staffing levels. The submissions we have received, and the evidence we have received so far, described clean-up at large, which, of course, as you know, can manifest in many different ways. I imagine there are a number of specialist roles. You probably require certain people to do things like tree-lopping et cetera. Can I get a better understanding about how many people TCCS employ who are qualified, capable and resourced to do that general suburban maintenance that we have heard so much about throughout the inquiry? I refer to the street sweeping, the picking up of smaller branches, the mowing and tidying after an event like this.

Mr Corrigan: I can answer at a general level. With the actual numbers, I would have to take that on notice to give you a precise breakdown of the crews.

THE CHAIR: Of course.

Mr Corrigan: Our crews out there—our city presentation crews particularly—do a range of work such as cleaning, mowing, sharps pickup, and all of these municipal-type things. There are over 300 across the territory doing all of those things.

Going to the more specialist roles, our urban trees team is a separate team again. They are the ones who deal with bringing trees down. Within those crews we have specialists there as well, because some of the crews are in cranes, they operate at heights and all of those things. With some of the large trees that they bring down, there is a lot of skill needed to do that well and safely. Sometimes these things are near arterial roads. These are all parts of the work that we have to consider. So we have specialists there as well.

With the roads, you mentioned the sweepers. The sweeper machines are specialist bits of equipment; there are trained drivers to run those things. We have a small team doing that in our roads crew. I can get the individual breakdown of that for you.

With the general amenity jobs, we have lots of people trained. We also have, over the summer period, another workforce that we bring in. We have a casual workforce that comes in and assists. Going through to those specialist jobs, there are certain numbers and certain people to do certain things.

THE CHAIR: I could keep going, but I cannot take too many liberties as chair. I will defer to Mr Milligan.

MR MILLIGAN: I want to clarify processing in terms of an emergency. An emergency comes through, ESA respond and deal with the emergency initially. The SES are then brought in, and they support the ESA. Once the storm has gone, it comes under community recovery, under CSD, to come in and render assistance. They do an assessment and decide what sort of assistance needs to be given out in the community. This probably goes a little bit to the chair's question in terms of resources: are they adequately equipped and resourced to do what is required to bring the community back to where it was prior to an emergency, such as the one we saw in January?

Ms Davidson: Before I pass over to Jo Wood to talk in more detail about what CSD's resourcing needs might be, what you are touching on there is the fact that we also need to be prepared for different kinds of natural disasters. The kind of community recovery that might be needed for, say, recovery from a storm event might be quite different from how we got through the pandemic when people were in lockdown. It might also be quite different from how we might recover from something like the 2003 bushfires.

We do not necessarily know what event we will have to face, but we have to be able to resource ourselves in a way that is flexible enough to deal with anything. Part of that is about the relationships between ACT government, our community sector and our broader community, who often end up being the first ones to be able to point out, "Here's where some community recovery is needed, and this is the type of recovery help that we need," so the ACT government can support what the community are actually leading. There is some work that we are doing in order to understand how we can better do that. I will pass over to Jo Wood, who can talk in more detail.

Ms Wood: I have read and acknowledge the privilege statement. CSD, under the legislation that manages emergencies and recovery, take the lead in social recovery. As the minister has outlined, that will look quite different depending on the kind of emergency.

One of the core functions that we are responsible for immediately in the event of an emergency—in something like COVID it was a longer term requirement—is support for emergency food and material aid. We have a range of programs where organisations are funded to deliver that. We had, during COVID, the Canberra Relief Network and ongoing work with the community sector on emergency food responses.

As the minister said, one of the big things that we do is activate that community

partner network. When we are linking people to support, one of our real goals is, if they need longer term support, they are linked in to support that can continue. Often the presenting issue will be a food issue and a need for emergency material aid, but that would be the presenting issue, and there is a whole range of complexity for that person or family. When we can connect them in through the food pantries to some of the community services, they can get a range of supports as they build a relationship there.

As the minister said, we need to respond to different kinds of emergencies. A storm response, obviously, is very different from what we have done throughout COVID. We do need to have the capacity to flex up a social recovery response and bring, depending on what is needed, not just the right number of people but the right skills into that. But we do not need that all the time. It is a flexible response, depending on what is needed.

MR MILLIGAN: In relation to the storm in January, obviously CSD went out and did a review. Was the amount of debris brought up as a significant area that needed to be addressed? If it was, were the department adequately equipped to deal with that? If they were not, did they consider calling in a different agency for help?

We have heard from Disaster Relief Australia; they provide a lot of that assistance, particularly in the recovery and clean-up after an emergency. Why weren't they or some other agency called to help clean up the debris, if that was an outcome of the review, post the storm?

Ms Davidson: Part of that goes to working out our understanding of what are the priorities in the moment, whether we still have safety issues that need to be addressed first and whether we have moved into a clean-up and recovery stage. I will pass to Richard Glenn to talk more about how we know at what point we need to move to a different stage, and who we need to be calling in.

Mr Glenn: I acknowledge the privilege statement. You talked about some of the processes at the beginning. As we go through the life span of an emergency and move from the immediate response phase into the recovery phase, the ACT government has a mechanism called the ACT Recovery Committee, which meets to look at what the recovery needs are—in this instance, for the storm.

That is part of the process at a whole-of-government level to be able to identify the tasks that need to be done. That is done both through our own intelligence, from people on the ground through the course of the exercise, and through what we hear from community as we go about. In this instance, many of the needs for material aid and so forth had been addressed through the hub at the Molonglo RFS station. We were much more in the space of thinking about what effort would be required to deal with green waste and debris. The committee set up a plan that was exercised, and it called upon the different resources across government to be able to deliver that, primarily through TCCS and Parks and Conversation staff, who are tasked with being able to deal with those sorts of issues.

MR MILLIGAN: In effect, was TCCS called in to deal with debris through that assessment? Was TCCS one of those agencies that was called in?

Ms Davidson: I will pass to Mr Corrigan, who can talk to you about that.

Mr Corrigan: With the initial response, there were a number of agencies involved. Our colleagues who look after the SES can respond to that. This response was large. There were a lot of people on the ground to do what needed to be done.

TCCS came in with the recovery phase. At the risk of repeating myself—I hope this gets to the heart of the question—TCCS had all of the calls and requests coming in for assistance after the storm, and once the first emergency response had happened we put crews on the ground to do another assessment. We had officers who walked around all of the damaged suburbs. We made another list of what needed to be done. We then triaged the jobs. Again, safety comes first. With any trees where either the whole tree was at risk of falling or branches were still hanging or swinging, we dealt with those first. We got all of those to the ground as quickly as we could. It was then about making the areas functional. Roads were cleared; pathways were cleared. We then went to the shopping centres and community areas, to make sure that they were clear and functional, so that people could get around. We then went to the verges and the amenity of the area. That is how we did it; so it took some time.

Having regard to your line of questioning, the immediate response happened; then we took over in the recovery phase. That is how we triaged it, to make it functional. I think that is where some frustration came in for residents. With some streets, all of the street trees were damaged or had fallen over. In their mind, even though they could reverse out of their driveway and drive down the road, the place looked terrible. Trees and limbs were down all over the place, and after a few weeks they brown up. That is why—because we triaged that. Once it was safe, we went through, suburb by suburb, street by street.

MR MILLIGAN: Have there been any lessons learnt in terms of the effectiveness of the department in getting out there and doing this clean-up, assessment and review? A lot of feedback we received from the community was that things have been sitting there for months. Debris has been sitting there for months. Was TCCS used effectively and efficiently, and did it work quickly enough to clean up the debris and the concerns raised from the community?

Ms Davidson: Before I pass back to Mr Corrigan to speak specifically to TCCS's lessons learnt, I think there have been some good lessons learnt for whole of government out of this experience, in terms of how we integrate all of the different services and directorates together. If you look around this room, you will see the number of different parts of government who are involved in dealing with an event of this magnitude. It gives you some concept of how many different people across how many different work areas need to be in contact with each other and understanding what each other's different roles and responsibilities are, who to call and when. That is really important work for us to be thinking about, as we go forward knowing that we have to be prepared for anything in the future. It might not be a storm next time. It might be fire, it might be flood, it might be something else relating to COVID.

We also need to think about the context in which this happened. In the first week of January, not just the ACT government's workforce but the community sector were

exhausted. Everyone had been working so hard to get our community through what we all experienced together in 2021. There were a whole lot of people who were on leave or trying to recover from that.

At the same time as this supercell hit us, the Omicron wave started. We suddenly had a whole lot of people catching COVID. I was one of them. I was supposed to be on leave that week, and this storm happened. I was sitting there, not even in my own house, trying to deal with making calls and trying to understand that, whilst also catching COVID myself in that same week. There would have been countless numbers of people throughout all of these ACT government directorates experiencing the very same thing. Yes, there will be some lessons learned in TCCS specifically, but there are things for whole of government to learn about how we connect with each other.

THE CHAIR: I have a supplementary for you, Minister, that might seem spicy, and I say it with no disrespect to all of the wonderful people in the room. With your point that there are so many people involved in the response to something like this—we might be on the same path here, Mr Milligan—how does government ensure that too many cooks do not spoil the broth? When there are a lot of people doing a lot of different things, how do you, in a crisis, centralise command and make sure someone or some small group is authoritative and understands exactly what is happening at any time?

Ms Davidson: That is why we have inter-directorate groups who get together to make sure that they are agreed on who has what role and responsibility at different points in dealing with a situation like this. I can pass to Richard Glenn to talk in more detail about how those decisions get made and how we make sure that we stay on top of the changing situation.

Mr Glenn: Within the structure of the Emergencies Act and the framework, there are graduated responses as to how this could work. Fundamentally, in most situations, you would have the recovery committee work, which is chaired by an officer of my directorate, and which assists in the coordination of effort across whole of government.

In significant emergencies with very complex situations, there is the capacity to appoint a recovery coordinator, which is a little similar to appointing an emergency coordinator during the response phase. It is to say, "Here is a single person who is going to be tasked with leading recovery." That is typically done in situations of really extreme damage and significant recovery activity.

One of the things we try to do through the system is right-size the response and right-size the mechanism that we deploy to be able to address the recovery needs that are delivered. That said, we always seek to learn from our experiences. We go through these exercises because no emergency, and therefore no recovery, is the same as the last, and we need to gather better—

THE CHAIR: On that point, on reflection, does government believe that appointing a recovery coordinator in this instance could have or would have provided either more efficiencies in the government's response or greater understanding by the community of the government's response?

Mr Glenn: I can give my view. I do not think I can give the government's view.

THE CHAIR: I would appreciate that.

Mr Glenn: No, I do not think so. I think there are some lessons that we can learn through the recovery process, but I am not sure that the activation of that mechanism by itself would have achieved a different result.

MR PETTERSSON: I have a very similar line of questioning. Reading through the submission, the ACT Recovery Committee seemingly took charge on Wednesday, 5 January. Who was in charge before then?

Ms Davidson: When an emergency initially happens, there would be an emergency services response.

Mr Glenn: With the emergency response, the incident controller is dealing with the immediate response. The recovery committee met on the Wednesday, which I think was 5 January. The recovery committee was starting when the response was still in place. There was a handover between the incident controller and the incident management team in ESA and the recovery committee, which happened a little bit later in the week, on 7 January, I think.

Mr Jones: I have read the privilege statement, and I acknowledge it. That is an interesting question, because recovery does start at the time of the incident. You should always prepare, as we do in emergency services, for that. When we say we had a partial ECC, Emergency Coordination Centre, activated at the time of the storm, that is where we bring in the key players relevant to that incident that we know of at the time. That transitioned through to about the Wednesday afternoon, when the formal ECC was stood up. That is where we put an activation out to about 200 people, roughly, with all of the different directorates and emergency services around Australia, Defence Force and supporting agencies. We then choose which ones come in and support the emergency.

That is when we had the first meeting in the afternoon about the recovery committee, and some discussions happened about what recovery would look like and how that would be controlled. That went right through to the formal recovery meeting on the Friday, where there was an action plan put forward to transition from an emergency into a recovery phase.

MR PETTERSSON: How much ministerial involvement is there in this process?

Mr Jones: That normally gets briefed through the SEMSOG committee, which briefs up to the DG group. Ministerially, as I said, at this point there is not a lot of influence at that level, because it is an incident that is being managed under the Emergencies Act. It then transitions through into a recovery plan. These plans are well-thought-out and practiced regularly, and we would normally transition to that. I am not sure whether that answers the question in relation to the ministerial input.

Mr Glenn: There are very regular briefings to all relevant ministers—Minister

Davidson and Minister Gentleman on the emergency response, the Chief Minister and through cabinet mechanisms—to make sure that ministers are aware and are able to voice their views on the response and the way it is rolling out.

Ms Davidson: To some extent, when an incident happens, which ministers are required will depend in part on exactly what the nature of that incident is. You cannot make a blanket rule about, "When a natural disaster happens, we're going to call these specific people." The minister who is responsible for emergency services will always be one of the first people on the list, but it depends on where, and the nature of who is impacted, as to who else will need to be involved.

MR PETTERSSON: A recurring theme in the evidence that this committee has received is that there was a lack of information and a failure of communication. Has the government learnt any specific lessons from this emergency as to how we can communicate better in the future?

Ms Davidson: Yes. Before I pass over to CMTEDD to talk in more detail about the communications response and what we have learnt, I expect that there is quite a bit that we have learnt on how we can communicate more effectively with people. Are you talking specifically about during the event or is it more about the clean-up and recovery stage afterwards?

MR PETTERSSON: Both would be good.

Ms Davidson: Let us start with during the event. In fact, communication often starts with what is happening before the event, in terms of things like some of the great work that Community Services Directorate did with the "know your neighbour" cards, throughout the 2021 COVID response. It laid some good groundwork for people knowing who their neighbours are, knowing who might be most at risk in their local neighbourhood and being able to support people within their own community—that kind of community-led response. There is also a level of response that happens when we realise there is the risk that an incident might happen. I will pass to Emergency Services to talk about that.

Mr Jones: Yes, I can answer the emergencies point. This is an interesting one for us because traditionally we use social media, we use pre-warnings and we use warnings during the event. It is always aimed to either prepare the community to be ready for it or give them advice as to what they should do during the emergency. With the storm, it happened pretty quickly. The final warning for us was at 4.21 pm on the Monday from the BOM, when we knew that there was something significant coming, and that was not enough time to warn the community of the significance of the event.

With our traditional messaging, 104 social posts and 15 interviews went out, which was great in a traditional way. One of the things that was evident through the Wednesday was the amount of community interaction with the frontline staff on the ground that were working in the streets. We had 300-odd personnel. From that, the information back to headquarters, to the IMT, was quite significant. We identified that we were not in their face. The question always was, "Do we doorknock?" In this particular case, it was too late at that point to begin doing doorknocking. But that certainly triggered the hub, because we knew that the community was asking

questions about basic, fundamental things that we needed to give answers to. We wanted to make sure that we had a single point of truth, that people who were working on the front line could answer the questions, that that question was theirs to answer and, relevant to the position of Emergency Services, where we were heading as a whole-of-incident.

Certainly, that is absolutely what triggered the hub, as we identified very early in the piece from the social networks within the community that people wanted face-to-face talking, which happened naturally through the amount of people in the streets. We found that, when we opened up the hub, we only had about one-third of people that came to the hub and actually required something, whether it was ice or the disposal of rubbish or soiled food. The rest of them came up for a social element, to understand what the complexities were. We had representatives there from Evoenergy, CSD and other government directorates.

The feedback in our after-action review was that that absolutely worked. For us, that was not a traditional way of communication, but we have learned that the feedback was significant, particularly with the demographics of that Belconnen area. The take-home for us is that traditional measures of communication do not work in all circumstances. Recognising that early means that we may have to go forward a little more with community-style hubs and using community groups, who know their people. Certainly, that happened naturally on the day, particularly on the Wednesday.

Ms Davidson: I will go back to something that I said in my opening statement about building layer upon layer of knowledge every time we have a natural disaster within the ACT and the things that we have learned from it. One of the really important things we learned after the 2003 bushfires in the ACT was how important evacuation centres and community hubs are in having a physical place that people can go to, get some face-to-face contact, ask their questions and get a warm referral to the right person who can support their specific need in ways that you cannot necessarily do through Facebook and things like that. Sometimes people need some human interaction there.

The other part that you wanted to talk about was communication in the recovery afterwards, and what we might have learned from that. That might be something that Tamerra Rogers could talk a bit more about, in terms of communication and some of the feedback that we received through our social media channels, emails that were coming in and what people were asking about—what they felt that they needed to know. Is that the kind of thing you are looking for?

MR PETTERSSON: It sounds good to me.

THE CHAIR: Could I ask Mr Jones a quick supplementary? The Higgins hub is, I believe, what we are referencing here; is that right? We are talking about the Higgins hub?

Mr Jones: Yes.

THE CHAIR: I was struck by the evidence earlier today from the Belconnen Community Council, who described anecdotally people who would have been eligible

to access the services at a hub but, in that very typical Australian way, said, "I'm sure that's for someone who's more devastated than me and has had a worse impact from this than me," and so they did not. Is that a lesson learnt? Is that something government is reflecting on? If so, have we turned our minds to how we might tailor communications in the future to make sure that people do truly understand when they are eligible for certain services in an emergency?

Mr Jones: There are certainly lessons learnt for us. As I said before, our statistics do not support that, and I do not know the numbers that did not turn up. As I said, with the people that turned up and used the washing machines, for example, that was a new thing for us. Certainly, people used the washing machines. We had people charging phones and we had people getting ice. The majority of people just wanted a cup of coffee, to talk about what was next and actually hear from Evoenergy themselves about what was going on.

We found that a lot of people were not just there to ask for support; they were actually supporting their community. That might be a little bit of a misrepresentation of what we have seen at the other end—the numbers that came up and asked for something or used a service versus the people that just wanted to come up and talk or offer assistance. A lot of community groups offered food. Seven or eight community groups offered to cook food for us, and supply food and food hampers. It grew to a point where it almost became unmanageable because of the amount of community support offered to the hub.

I could take that on notice but I am pretty sure that the numbers indicate to me that it was not 100 per cent of people that came for help. A lot of people came to help others.

Ms Davidson: That is actually part of the recovery process for a lot of people, too. With the broader community, even if you are not impacted by a tree falling across your front yard or losing power to your own house, the fact that you are living in a community that has been through so much in recent years, with fires, storms, plague and all the rest of it, to then see another one on top of that can be quite a lot of emotional load.

For some people, the way in which they manage that is to say: "What is a practical way that I can give back to and support my community while we're all going through this hard thing together, to remind myself that I'm part of something that is bigger than just what's going on in my own house?" It is a really healthy thing for people to have a place where they can go and offer support.

MR PETTERSSON: The evidence we have just had does not mesh too well with what we have heard previously and what is in your submission. Your submission says that 600 people turned up to the hub. You have then said that a fair chunk of them were not really there to access the services per se; they were just there—

Mr Jones: Support them, yes.

MR PETTERSSON: for a cup of tea. But we have heard evidence from other people that they had no idea that the service existed. I am not sure that those two things mesh together too well.

Mr Jones: There is a difference there. I am saying that people have turned up to the hub. Our numbers relate to the people that went through the building. The ones who asked for services or supplies were less than half, but others came to help out and see what was going on. They used the services of Evoenergy or CSD; that might have been preparing for the next day or two.

In relation to the people that turned up, that was generally because of feedback through the community. Obviously, by that stage, the power had been exhausted, well and truly. The ones that had power had heard about it. We had put signs up. The lesson for us is: how do we do that better and get the message out early about the hubs? It might be in a preparedness document with the community groups, so that you know, as part of your emergency plan, that the hubs will be set up.

My point there is that people advised by the crews on the streets certainly turned up and sought assistance. Once the word got out in the community groups, it definitely increased. But the lesson learned for us is: how do we get that out quicker and make sure that we prepare for that in the future so that we can get better access to things? We had issues where people were dropping off food to supply to people. It is about how we manage that sort of community generosity.

Ms Davidson: That goes to making sure that you get the message out through a variety of different channels and methods. Having a physical hub for people to turn up to is good; equally, it is about having information online and having places that people can phone and ask, "Where do I go and what do I do?" That is something that Tamerra can talk about.

THE CHAIR: I will let Mr Milligan ask a supplementary; then we will go to Ms Rogers.

MR MILLIGAN: Given that electricity was the biggest issue in terms of effectively being able to communicate—you mentioned that doorknocking was out of the question because it was too late—why wasn't doorknocking considered, or a letterbox drop to reach the community, inform them about the hub and any other support and services that were available? What lesson has been learned and will you consider those two options in the future?

Ms Davidson: I will pass to Richard Glenn, who can talk more about the times when doorknocking is most effective. Certainly, in preparing for something that is about to hit, doorknocking can be an effective tool. But once you are actually in a disaster zone, doorknocking is not always a safe or logistically feasible thing to do in the immediate response to an issue that is causing safety problems for the community. I will let Mr Glenn talk in more detail.

Mr Glenn: The minister has captured the timing in which doorknocking works, which is in preparation for something to happen. That is partly because we are asking the community to do something—either prepare to do something, in terms of their own preparedness, or to get ready to leave. It also takes quite a long time to do. It is not a fast means of communication. If you deploy those resources to get around to people, you are not actually getting around to many, if you are trying to get people to leave

safely.

The general proposition that I think we are talking about is: how do we make sure people can find out about the existence of things like hubs faster and better? That is an area to which we can give further thought, as the commissioner said. There is word of mouth; there are other mechanisms. There is perhaps further thought that we could give to that. Doorknocking, in particular, for that function, is probably not the solution. It has a really valuable role to play, but it is at the front end, not the back end.

MR MILLIGAN: And letterboxing?

Mr Glenn: Letterboxing probably has a similar time issue for me, but we are always open to look at these things. We would need a workforce and we would need time to get around areas to be able to do that. We are actually looking for a more immediate means of communication with the community.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Glenn. Ms Rogers, could you acknowledge the privilege statement?

Ms Rogers: I have read and acknowledge the privilege statement.

THE CHAIR: For everyone's benefit, not least yours, Mr Pettersson, would you mind clarifying the question you had for Ms Rogers?

MR PETTERSSON: We have covered it quite extensively now.

Ms Rogers: Yes.

MR PETTERSSON: In essence, it was what lessons we have learnt about communicating following the storm. The second part of the question was in regard to the relief effort. If you have anything further to add, I would be glad to hear it.

Ms Rogers: Certainly. We provided additional support staff in the communications function for Emergency Services in the initial period of 5 to 7 January. Probably the key thing, and what you have all mentioned already, particularly the minister, is that there are so many moving parts, particularly in an emergency. This one was unique in that we were coming into another wave of COVID, which, of course, also feeds into doorknocking and safety, for volunteers and for people in their homes.

As we said, there is the initial response of communications, which does focus on safety for the community—any emerging safety issues, if there is a tree that is at risk of falling on a house. Those things are prioritised in the first instance. Of course, there is the more traditional communication from a whole-of-government perspective about where people can reach services as they can get them—the hub and things like that.

When you are talking about lessons learned, we make a practice, every time that there is something like an emergency or a PICC is stood up, absolutely, to have a look for the gaps where we could have done better. We take advice from the community through our social media. There are so many positive messages from people on our social media about support they were given by Emergency Services and how quickly

that happened. We understand that, for other people, perhaps that was not as quick, and we also take that advice.

The key thing here, as many of you have mentioned, was the lack of electricity. Our traditional communication means are television, radio, social media and things like that. Absolutely, there were lessons learnt; absolutely, we have already formed working groups and task forces to talk about, in the future, should that be the case, how we can get that messaging out, and whether it is by way of doorknocking.

Something that particularly came to our attention was how can we better educate the community on where they can get these services, particularly when we are not in an emergency phase? With doorknocking, as an example, our OC newsletter is delivered to every house. As has been mentioned, preparing those newsletters takes time—getting them printed, getting them delivered—in which case the circumstances would likely have changed by then. For us, it is about making sure that we are not only getting the information out quickly but also that the information is accurate and relevant, because it changes so quickly—by the time it is printed, it has probably changed again.

Ms Davidson: The channels that we use are also rapidly changing, as this world that we are in is changing and experiencing more disasters. When you think back to how we all heard about what was going on during the 2003 bushfires, I was in Canberra during that period of time, and battery-powered radios were still a thing that we all had in our house. Everything in my house now connects to the internet and power, so, if we lose power and we lose internet, I do not know what is going on anymore. A lot of houses are like that these days. As a community and as a society, we need to think about how we connect with each other. How do we share the information we have in a situation like that, to make sure that your next-door neighbours, the people a little further down the street, have the same information that you have, and share the knowledge?

MR MILLIGAN: Where the hub was located had not changed. That information could have been out there. Emergency contact details and who to contact could have been out there. Maybe, for those people that are vulnerable, there could have been contact information in this type of communication as well. None of that information changes. That could have still been sent out there, and I am sure that would have helped and assisted a lot of residents.

Ms Davidson: Keep in mind, too, that we are still talking about trying to get that information out to people within a matter of days, because that is when they actually need it. That is when it is relevant to them. What are the channels that are actually available to us and will be effective within that time frame? If doorknocking and letterboxing are not going to be effective within that time frame, because there are streets still being cleared of trees that are down and there are COVID safety concerns about people knocking on your door, is it better for us to build a level of community resilience so that it becomes normal to knock on your neighbour's door and say, "Hey, do you know"—

MR MILLIGAN: Did Australia Post stop during that event? Did they say, "We can't letterbox to Belconnen"? What about any other delivery service? Did they stop?

Ms Davidson: You also have to think about how long it takes to prepare a piece of material, get it printed, get it to Australia Post and reliably have them get it to, say, the 17 most affected suburbs where there are still trees blocking some streets, while you are trying to clear it.

MR MILLIGAN: As a publisher in my previous role, it is very quick. You can put together information, send it to print, get it printed and ready for distribution within 24 hours. Any of the printing firms here would be able to do that easily.

THE CHAIR: We will take that as a comment. I am sure that if you need a good printing firm, Mr Milligan will be happy to recommend one.

Ms Davidson: I will keep that in mind if I ever need a printing firm; thank you very much.

MR MILLIGAN: I just do not accept that there is not enough time.

THE CHAIR: In the remaining five minutes, I have one question for you, Minister. I hate to end on a rough note, but it will have to be, because our city has suffered a lot of natural disasters over the last couple of years. If the scientific consensus of our changing climate is anything to plan for, it is going to get worse before it gets better. We clearly need to prepare for more natural disasters that are potentially worse.

There is a full body of evidence of what the government is doing to contribute to the fight against a changing climate, but I am interested in what the government is doing to educate the community on preparedness and an understanding of the risks of future natural disasters—not just building the community resilience that you talked about, about people knowing their neighbour and supporting each other, but doing the legwork now to support themselves for what will be, unfortunately, for many Canberrans, an inevitable next disaster.

Ms Davidson: Thank you. This actually could be a good place for those kinds of communications that do take longer to prepare and need more lead time. If we are going to talk about how to prepare for the next event, we know that every year there is a peak season for storm events. The lead-up to that is actually the time to be getting the information out to the community about making sure that you have a household emergency preparedness plan and making sure that you are having those conversations with the entire household. That means making sure that you are including our senior Canberrans, our older people, as well as very young children. There are a lot of people out there in the community who think that, if you are a much older person and maybe have some mobility concerns and things like that, you cannot be part of the preparedness for this. For very young children, it might actually be scary. Actually, the opposite is true. All of the research shows that, by including people of all ages and abilities in emergency preparedness, you are building community resilience, and you are building people's ability mentally to deal with what happens when the emergency situation strikes, because they know what part they are going to play in how they respond to that. It makes it all a little bit less scary in the moment when something goes wrong. That is something that we can and do prepare for every year. I might pass back to Ms Rogers, who can talk to you about what we

can do to prepare for the next emergency season.

Ms Rogers: Certainly, there is something that we have taken from this, when you speak of lessons learnt, and you mentioned people not being sure if they were eligible, for example, to go to the hub and things like that. The period when we are not in an emergency, of course, is the best time for us to prepare the community for any upcoming emergencies—educating the community on having an emergency kit that has candles, batteries and things like that, so that they can have a radio to hear communications and things like that.

What is very important as well is to consider, for example, our culturally and linguistically diverse members of the community. In periods when we are not in an emergency, it is about making sure that we are getting that message to the multicultural radio stations and to our community groups to make sure that our entire community is included, whether you are technologically savvy all of the time and on Facebook, or whether you get it from the radio or printed material. That is certainly something we as a group are now considering, following on from this emergency, where electricity was the main issue.

There are also multiple points where that information is available. There is, of course, the ESA website and things like that. We are also looking at how we can maximise the reach of the education and training that is already in place for our community.

Ms Davidson: It is also about making sure that we are keeping up to date on which organisations within our community and which parts of other ACT government directorates might be in a position to help with the response to any given situation that might arise in future. That is also work that we can do in between an emergency season to prepare for the next one and to know who we can call on to get involved, what they are best able to help with and what kind of supports they might need from ACT government if we did have to call on them.

THE CHAIR: On behalf of the committee, I would like to thank you, Minister Emma Davidson, and your officials for appearing before the committee today. When available, a copy of the proof transcript will be forwarded to all witnesses to provide an opportunity to check the transcript for accuracy. Let us know if there have been any errors.

A number of witnesses today have taken questions on notice, and we ask that the answers to those questions are provided to the committee in a timely manner—ideally, in the next business week. If there are any members of the Assembly who wish to place a question on notice, they need to get those to our committee secretary—ideally, in the next few days. The committee's hearing today is now adjourned.

The committee adjourned at 5.01 pm.