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## Submission

### Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee – Inquiry into the 2022 Flood Event in Victoria

#### ***Strengthening the role of neighbourhood houses in disaster response: lessons from the 2022 floods***

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## Introduction

During the 2022 flood event, neighbourhood houses (NHs) in regional Victoria led the flood efforts in many communities, including Rochester, Charlton, Echuca, Numurkah and Mooroopna.

This is not a new role for neighbourhood houses: it was also the case in the 2019 bushfires (notably in Kinglake) and many other fire events as well as the 2011 Victorian floods.

Because neighbourhood houses are:

- Enmeshed in their communities and known as places where community gathers;
- Points of referrals for the full range of community services in local areas;
- Highly connected to other community groups, either formally or informally (on average, a neighbourhood houses auspices 3-4 other community organisations);
- Responsive and action-oriented, able to respond very quickly;

...they are natural places for community to seek and offer help, and often the first place community members gravitate to in a crisis.

However, neighbourhood houses do not have access to discretionary funding to support these efforts. Through close cooperation between the office of Minister Colin Brooks, DFFH and Neighbourhood Houses Victoria (peak body), additional targeted funding was provided in a very timely fashion during the immediate response, namely:

\$500,000 to support flood relief efforts by neighbourhood houses through a grant program administered by DFFH; and

\$500,000 for neighbourhood houses and men's sheds to cover uninsured damage to buildings and equipment.

Following the initial response, \$400,000 in funding was provided by the Mental Health – Prevention and Wellbeing Unit in the Department of Health to support community initiatives to strengthen resilience as communities recover. This is the first time the Department of Health has formally recognised the role of neighbourhood houses in community resilience and connection as a protective mental health factor.

This submission addresses inquiry scope item (3) *resourcing of the State Emergency Service, the adequacy of its response to the Flood Event and the adequacy of its resourcing to deal with increasing floods and natural disasters in the future* specifically in relation to recognising and supporting the role of neighbourhood houses in disaster response.

This submission focuses on recommended measures to strengthen the natural role already played by neighbourhood houses in disaster response and recovery.

## The role of neighbourhood houses

There are over 400 Neighbourhood Houses across Victoria, visited in an average week by 160,000 Victorians. Neighbourhood houses employ 5,500 staff across Victoria supported by 30,000 regular volunteers.

Core funding comes from the state government's Neighbourhood House Coordination Program (NHCP), representing an annual commitment of \$40M in ongoing funding administered through the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (DFFH). This will typically cover most of the costs of one staff member. Other revenue comes from the Adult Community Further Education program (ACFE) which covers some of the cost of community education undertaken by the NH. Typically, the neighbourhood house will need to match this government funding through local initiatives such as fee-for-service programs in order to operate.

This leaves no discretionary funding for other activities, particularly resource-intensive disaster recovery efforts.

The majority of NHs are community owned and run by committees of management with a paid Manager and sometimes other staff.

Guided by a community development approach, they each engage and respond to the needs and priorities of the communities they serve.

Typical activities of NHs:

- Adult education (pre-accredited and accredited training)
- Art and craft classes
- Childcare
- Community events
- Community lunches / Social eating groups
- Community gardens
- Digital literacy training
- Food banks

- Government services such as Centrelink, Vic Roads
- Job seeking support
- Health and wellbeing activities such as exercise, walking groups, yoga and tai chi
- Internet access
- Library or book swap services
- Maternal child health
- Men's Sheds
- Migrant support programs e.g. English classes
- Playgroups
- Room hire
- Referrals
- Self help and support groups
- Seniors' groups
- Toy libraries
- Visitor/tourist information
- Volunteering opportunities
- Youth programs

Neighbourhood houses took lead roles in the 2011 Victorian floods, expending significant resources in the flood response that were not reimbursed.

In the 2019 fire response, neighbourhood houses that were in affected communities (but the NH was not destroyed) provided gathering points and material aid.

Neighbourhood houses in neighbouring communities will also assist impacted NHs, even where their own communities are not directly affected. Mutual support and cooperation is central to the culture of the Neighbourhood House Sector.

### Neighbourhood houses in the 2022 flood event

The following neighbourhood houses were directly involved in flood relief (see *Appendix I* for examples of support provided by some of the neighbourhood houses involved):

Echuca Neighbourhood House  
 Rochester Community House  
 Crossenvale Community House  
 Quambatook Community Resource Centre  
 Donald Learning Group Inc  
 Marong Neighbourhood House  
 Kyabram Community and Learning Centre  
 West Footscray Neighbourhood House  
 Eaglehawk Community House  
 Numurkah Community Learning Centre  
 Creswick neighbourhood centre  
 Charlton Neighbourhood House  
 Heathcote Community House Inc  
 Stawell Neighbourhood House  
 Pyramid Hill Neighbourhood House  
 Romsey Neighbourhood House  
 Yea community house  
 Flowerdale Community House  
 Tatura Neighbourhood House

## Lessons learnt and recommendations

### What went well?

Immediate response	<p>Neighbourhood Houses responded immediately when it became clear areas would flood. Often the community response occurs before local, state and federal government support is activated.</p> <p>Neighbourhood Houses established relief centres (Rochester, Echuca Mooroopna), coordinated community giving for material relief (several) and, once it was established, assisted community members in accessing personal hardship payments (PHAP) and Services Australia disaster payments (approx. 18 NHs). Mooroopna alone filled and distributed 1,000 emergency relief hampers in the first 8 days of the flood event.</p> <p>Many other neighbourhood houses provided expertise and support to those impacted. Kinglake Neighbourhood House, after the experience of the 2019 fires, took on a role of guidance and support to several flood-affected houses.</p>
Collaboration between Minister's office, NHVic and DFFH	<p>As the peak body, Neighbourhood Houses Victoria coordinated real-time information from impacted NHs and shared it with DFFH and the Minister's Office via a continuously-updated shared document.</p> <p>This allowed the state government to quickly see the need to support neighbourhood houses and provided a common fact base to all parties. In the coming days, the document was accessed by other state government departments seeking to understand what was happening 'on the ground'. It also allowed for target support from Services Australia personnel, such as setting up a mobile office in Mooroopna.</p> <p>With the caretaker period rapidly approaching, it was essential that funding was authorised and a program established so DFFH could enable the payments quickly. All parties worked together to delivery payments within weeks. Where more urgent support was required, NHVic provided this as an advance on allocated funding from its own reserves.</p>
Access to mental health services	<p>Through a relationship with mental health NFP Support Pathways, mental health support and consultations were facilitated by NHVic and provided to the hardest hit areas in Rochester and Echuca. In Rochester, door knocking promoted this service and enabled it to reach people who would not normally proactively seek help.</p>
Assisting the community to access PHAP support	<p>The state government's personal hardship application process (PHAP) was welcome but difficult to access for people with digital connectivity or digital literacy issues. This is particularly heightened during a crisis when personal computing equipment is destroyed, electricity is unreliable and personal documents and inaccessible or damaged. 22 NHs were equipped to assist community members in accessing these payments, which was instrumental in getting assistance to people quickly (note below however some of the documentation challenges and recommendation).</p>

Support for community resilience through the recovery	Recognising the community recovery takes far longer than the initial disaster response, \$400K in funding was provided to NHVic to administer a program of grants to NHs to support community resilience and strengthening initiatives.
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### What can improve?

Incorporation of neighbourhood houses in disaster preparedness and funding	<p>In a disaster, neighbourhood houses respond within hours with whatever resources they have or can source locally. The response could be more effective if:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Role of the NH is clear cut and agreed in advance</li> <li>• Plans are agreed, documented, rehearsed and updated</li> <li>• Infrastructure and equipment (particularly generators, storage, communication systems, food storage) are in place and maintained appropriately</li> </ul> <p>Not only will this improve the timeliness and effectiveness of the response, it avoids placing an unsustainable and unplanned financial burden on these community organisations.</p> <p>Adequate and ongoing funding of the role of neighbourhood houses in disaster preparedness is not only a fair and responsible way to support this essential service, it will lead to greater community ownership and better personalised and localised supports.</p>
Additional load of managing community donations	Many neighbourhood houses became repositories for donations from well-meaning community members during the flood. Well meaning community members, with the best intentions, often donated unusable or unsuitable items, which then need to be sorted, catalogued and stored. This is an undue burden. Echuca Neighbourhood House engaged GIVIT, the material aid NFP, to manage these donations, which helped ensure usable donations that were not appropriate to the flood situation could be used. It also removed a considerable drag on the staff and volunteers of the house
Huge numbers of unpaid hours worked	Neighbourhood house managers and staff worked extensive additional hours through the crisis. While they did so willingly and in the best interests of the community, it's not fair to rely on this unpaid labour to provide an essential service. A mechanism for keeping track of and providing payment for these original hours is the only equitable solution.
Crisis doesn't end when flood waters recede	In Echuca, the neighbourhood house is still wearing the additional load of community need due to the floods, but funding for an additional flood worker runs out at 30 June. Many community members are still living in hotels and caravans and relying on food and material relief. It needs to be recognised that, depending on the type of disaster, community need extends well beyond the initial disaster remediation. As we know from the 2019 fires, community need can be elevated for years after the crisis.
Difficulty accessing online portals	An online portal, whether via Services Australia or Victoria, is an efficient way for people to enroll for supports, but it needs to be recognised that access can be difficult in a crisis. Many people presented to neighbourhood houses asking for help to sign up for disaster payments, however unless they were already registered for MyGov ID or Services Victoria, they were unable to provide adequate ID as it was inaccessible or destroyed.

## Recommendations

Based on these learnings, we ask the Inquiry to consider the following recommendations:

1. Formally recognise the role of neighbourhood houses in disaster recovery.
2. Map neighbourhood houses into the state's disaster recovery plan, both at a state and LGA level.
3. Fund a disaster preparedness project coordinated by Neighbourhood Houses Victoria and a suitably experienced disaster response practitioner to work with NHs to evaluate and document their disaster preparedness, and any required improvements to processes or infrastructure. This should include a specific initiative for NHs to register community members in disaster-prone areas with Services Australia and Services Victoria to ensure they meet ID requirements to access supports in advance of a potential emergency.
4. Provide ongoing funding to assist neighbourhood houses enact and maintain disaster response preparedness plans.
5. Ring fence funding in the disaster response plan to be immediately made available to NHs in an identified disaster to enable faster deployment of community resources.

## Appendix I: Statements from neighbourhood house managers during and after the flood event.

### **Numurkah Neighbourhood House**

“Over the flood event, Numurkah has become extremely busy with food relief and support. Although Numurkah was not significantly impacted by the water inundating the town, many people in outlying areas were affected by road closures and isolation. Even now, as the water subsides, there are still community members who find it difficult to afford food and fuel or get to work, given the state of roads and road closures. Due to my own community being inundated and my role as CFA Communications Officer, my time was spent at home as a link between ICC in Shepparton, Vic Emergency, Police and the community. I, therefore, missed the flood grant timeline. I spoke to Cameron McCrae [of Neighbourhood Houses Victoria] about possibly getting some assistance. I knew it was a long shot but he said the Department was taking my request seriously. I received a call from Shepparton Foodshare who were notified we were in need of further supplies and I was able to go down to Mooroopna and collect a lot of supplies to supplement what we had received from Moira Foodshare. It is helpful to have access to further supplies but the need of the community at present is more than basic food items and it would be helpful to have the capacity to provide other staples such as fuel vouchers, phone cards, cleaning supplies, personal hygiene products including insect repellent and baby needs (nappies, formula, wipes).”

### **Rochester Neighbourhood House**

*Note: some of these activities are still ongoing.*

- Sandbagging (volunteering)
- Establish gmail (rochyfloods@) and surveys for people requiring help and people who could come and help (volunteers)
- Coordination of morning meetings of other agencies and volunteers (this occurred for approx. 6 weeks)
  - Liaising with clean-up crews, emergency services and volunteers.
  - Shifted a lot of cool rooms
  - Met with a lot of ministers and important people.
- No supermarket for three weeks, so we were it. (as per your info already)
- Organise food for BBQ (and in some cases paying for said food) for volunteers and community
- Advocacy for services (Services Aust, DFFH, Insurance companies, Red Cross, Salvos, any other agencies in an emergency)
- Advocacy for the need of a “pop up village” for displaced residents.
- Coordination of donations (material and monetary)
- Planning of events to support community
  - Christmas Party (whole town. Over 2000 ppl)
  - Girls Night Out (300 ppl)
  - Other various ongoing and smaller events.
- Supporting the community with;

- Insurance issues
- Referrals (to case workers, legal support & mental health)
- Donations – coordination of material and money
  - Blankets (Rotary) 2000 plus
  - Heaters (St Vincent De Paul) 100
  - Heaters (Anglicare) 50
  - White Goods (various)
  - Patchwork quilts (various) 500 plus at least
  - Knitted goods (too many to mention)
- Run the shire's recovery hub on Monday and Friday to cover shire staff unavailability on those days.
- Anything else that pops up on our list – which is like GIVIT but actually works, unlike GIVIT..
- Trying to establish regular house programming
- Converting monetary donations to materials needs and distribution of this.
- Working with Shire, Schools, ERV, Anglicare and other organisations such as Rotary to support our community on this journey.

### **Mooroopna Education and Activity Centre:**

Relief activities undertaken during the after the flood:

- Hosting state and federal agencies, services aust, ag Victoria and mental health support agencies
- Hosted Japanese Encephalitis vaccination bus
- Recruited volunteers for house clean-ups in 1<sup>st</sup> week
- Sourced onsite presence to pharmacy, medical clinic and pathology here at MEAC and gp
- assisted with food parcels and information relating to disaster relief packages (up to \$1000). 2000 hampers in 1<sup>st</sup> 8 days.
- Assisted community to access over \$2,000,000 of flood relief for people adequate it skills
- Opened 7 days / week to provide material/food relief and other assistance
- Collected and distributed cooked meals from businesses/community groups
- Pickup and delivery of medications
- Vouchers for food grocery fuel hardware
- assist claims with it support
- fed and toileted door to door council workers at council request

### **Echuca Neighbourhood House**

*Note: Sarah Peake, Manager of Echuca NH, was awarded Echuca and District Citizen of the Year in recognition of the role of the neighbourhood house in the floods.*

- Did food drop offs to people on wrong side of levy who were unable to access food
- Other Food and material relief
- Info re Elmore site



- Worked with Emergency Recovery Victoria
- Coordinated military and volunteer clearing, sandbag removal, including volunteer recruitment, and securing support to fix/cleanup homes - delegated by shire
- Flood recovery hotline promotion, relief applications
- Information van in main st
- sourcing psychologist
- Community reconnection events
- Info and registration for hay for livestock
- Source and distribute dozens of pallets bottled water