

## Strathbogie Shire Council Submission

### **Inquiry into the state's preparedness for and response to Victoria's major flooding event of October 2022**

In October 2022 Strathbogie Shire was impacted by flooding which, in some areas, peaked above major flood levels.

More than 40 homes were inundated, about 100 houses were impacted by flood water and 27 community facilities were affected.

The agricultural sector lost crops, feed, and stock. It is estimated 10,842ha of farmland was devastated and about 80 primary producers accessed flood recovery funding.

Businesses across the region were shut down, some for the unforeseeable future. Council has worked with 20 businesses across our shire who have been adversely impacted.

More than 200 roads across our shire need repairs, with many of our roads unable to navigate safely without significant reductions in speed.

The impact was so damaging, Council was forced to enact the Force Majeure clause under the Road Management and Tree Management plans because we cannot keep the roads to the standards required.

Council received 262 calls to report water over road and trees down during the flood event, with Officers working around the clock responding to calls for help.

On top of this 136.42 tonnes, or 593 cubic metres, of flood waste was collected at our transfer stations and we expect this number to grow as waste will continue to be accepted until May 2, 2023.

During the October flood event Council officers provided updates almost hourly, through our website, social media channels, via text message and even letterbox drops.

This led to an increase in our social media reach of more than 175 per cent during October 2022.

The communities within Strathbogie Shire galvanised through this event with more than 150 people attending initial recovery meetings immediately after the events. The community showed a strong desire and willingness to support one another, often finding innovative solutions to solve problems, address gaps and provide assistance. This was particularly evident in communities that were well planned and had clear flood plans and responsibilities in place.

Council continues to deliver recovery services across the municipality and has conducted secondary impact assessments across the affected properties. Council has also engaged Windermere to provide case management support for complex cases. Councils Recovery Plan is also in the development stage as we recruit to key recovery roles.

The following provides further information on the flooding event – and the response - in Strathbogie Shire.

### **Adequacy and effectiveness of early warning systems**

In the lead up to the October flood event, Council's emergency management team was watching the forecast data from Bureau of Meteorology (BOM) closely.

This information ensured Council was on the front foot, an example being we had hired and installed portable generators to potential Emergency Relief Centres before the rain hit.

The BOM forecasts also allowed the Council to make decisions about the filling and distribution of sandbags to at risk communities.

Our outdoor crew filled more than 7000 sandbags, and with the help of the local State Emergency Service (SES) and Country Fire Authority (CFA), these were distributed prior to the flood peak.

In addition, the early warning systems provided Council with intelligence to stand up essential personnel for response and relief services and ensure necessary practical planning for relief centres was completed where the most severe damage was forecast. This enabled Council to be well prepared for whatever would eventuate.

The VicEmergency warnings together with the “live” stream monitoring gauge information for the Sevens Creeks was helpful in predicting the flooding impacts particularly with reference to the Council's Flood Emergency Plan.

### **Resourcing of the SES and adequacy of its response and resourcing to deal with increasing floods and natural disasters in the future**

In Strathbogie Shire there is only one SES unit (Euroa), with a small number of active members, this is expected to cover all townships including Nagambie (45kms away), Violet Town, Avenel, Longwood and Strathbogie.

The local CFA brigades, particularly in the flood impacted areas came together with Council and the SES to help fill and distribute sandbags.

Local knowledge provided countless benefits to Council and our community. Our volunteers' knowledge and experience through previous floods allowed Council to target sandbagging to most at risk sites.

In this event, Council observed that despite the best efforts of local SES Unit and the willingness of the CFA, there was a severe lack of intelligence received from the Incident Control Centre (Shepparton), in regard to what was happening in Strathbogie. A remote ICC model was spoken about, that was meant to be established, however this was not realised for Strathbogie. Strathbogie was formally invited to attend the ICC in Shepparton, seven days following the flood incident. This led to a fragmented response and recovery, as our communities' needs had moved from response to recovery. Essentially, Council was required to step in and manage the response and recovery themselves with minimal support and intelligence.

Moreover, this was only demonstrated further when Fire Rescue Victoria took over 10 days to complete any Initial Impact Assessments in our Municipality.

While both SES and CFA are facing the challenge of attracting volunteers to their organisations, the October 2022 flood event has highlighted the desperate need to boost SES volunteer numbers, and potentially reconsider the viability and sustainability of the SES as the lead agency for flooding emergencies.

Regardless of the success the SES may have in this area, the sheer scale of the event would require substantial support from the CFA volunteers supported by the Council to run a successful response campaign in future major flood events.

A review of the terms of reference for CFA and Fire Rescue Victoria may be required to formalise the coordinated approach as outlined above.

The SES also take a lead role in the review and update of the Municipal Flood Management Plans which are a sub-plan of the Municipal Emergency Management Plan (MEMP).

These plans are reviewed every three years and supported by our local Catchment Management Authority (CMA) in undertaking flood study reviews. Both the CMA and the SES need to be adequately resource at this planning level for the successful roll out of these reviews.

Furthermore, there needs to be reconsideration of the role of regionally based ICC's and their capacity to equally support both small and large rural shires in a timely manner. Strathbogie was essentially overlooked during the response phase of the event and State resources to support recovery were delayed.

### **Location, funding, maintenance, and effectiveness of engineered structures**

There is no allocated funding specifically provided for the ongoing maintenance of these structures in Strathbogie Shire.

Council maintains the levee at Castle Creek in Euroa, while the ownership and responsibility for a levee in Avenel is yet to be clarified.

Council is seeking to resolve this matter in conjunction with seeking a detailed flood modelling study for the Avenel township through the Goulburn Broken CMA (GBCMA).

The recent flood event raises the question about whether the construction of a funded levee scheme should proceed, where it can be demonstrated it will reduce the impact of flooding on the community.

Such a scheme could also investigate compulsory acquisitions for properties in an increased flood impact zone.

To do otherwise is to effectively ask ratepayers to fund the additional flood impact costs for a greater number of properties compared to the levee protected option.

### **Implications for future planning decisions**

The impacts of allowing any proposed development on land subject to flooding should be calculated and included as part of the decision-making process for the development approval in line with current policy.

For Council to make informed decisions, all flood modelling studies must be reviewed and updated regularly. This requires adequate resourcing from the SES and GBCMA.

Poorly worded policy such as the recently updated Clause 52.07 – Emergency Recovery of the Victorian Planning Provisions has led to confusion about the intent of the emergency recovery provisions. There is confusion as to whether or not these provisions are intended to only cover off on temporary accommodation or allows for more broader exemptions.

It is important that priority is given to implementing the latest flood data into planning schemes. Group amendments should be fast tracked and run by the State Government to avoid them being bogged down in local politics or stalled by lack of resourcing. Advisory Committees could be used to ensure adequate consultation is undertaken.

### **Impacts to Council's road network**

Strathbogie Shire Council's road network was also significantly damaged.

Across our shire we have 2210km of roads – 1465km unsealed and 748km sealed. On top of this there are 521 bridges and culverts to maintain.

Maintenance of this extensive road network is a significant ask, even when conditions are good.

With about 7500 ratepayers our ability to generate enough revenue to cover the actual costs to construct, maintain and upgrade roads and other assets is impossible without assistance from State and Federal governments.

We are a small rural shire and an asset-heavy level of government.

We manage our road maintenance responsibility prudently, considering the combined impacts of climatic conditions, rate capping and reduced government grants.

However, the continued lack of government investment in roads, maintenance, and infrastructure renewal, will have long-term impacts on the quality and safety of local roads across Strathbogie Shire.

Recent flooding and ongoing wet weather have deteriorated road surfaces to a point where some sections are difficult to navigate without significant reductions in speed.

This is not just frustrating for our community; it is a safety concern.

There has been a large increase in pavement failures due to the rain penetrating the sealed surface.

The current cost of sealed road major patching works in our area can be between \$85 - \$125 per square meter depending on depth of pavement.

The unsealed road infrastructure consists of roads which have a 150mm layer of manufactured material, typically a class 3 crush rock, and some instances Non-Descript Crushed Rock (NDCR) which is widely used for sheeting.

Heavy rain and flooding have deteriorated these roads, and, in some instances, the whole road base has been washed away.

The current cost to lay and compact the material to the original condition is about \$65 per lineal meter laid at a 4.5m pavement width.

Before the floods we had 227.68km of road that had been affected by ongoing wet weather requiring a re-sheet, equating to \$14,799,070 to restore it back to the condition it was three years ago.

### **Timeliness of Response and Recovery Funding**

Whilst Council understands response and recovery funding models take time to design and implement well, our municipal community was ready to take action and clean up immediately as waters subsided very quickly in many of our townships. A timelier response to support State coordinated recovery efforts including requests for information regarding funding particularly in regards to waste and immediate needs was required. Having to tell residents we don't know and that we are waiting for further advice from the funding bodies only heightened the existing stress community, and Council were under.

Greater clarity on what could and couldn't be funded is still required, and should have been clearer from the outset. Council waited for sign off on Community Recovery Officer Funding and Recovery Hub Funding for almost six months post disaster. The community does not understand this delay, and the State Election and Christmas closure are not adequate reasons for the community.

Communities deserve better.

**Post flooding, we estimate the damage bill could be three times this amount - reaching as high as \$50 million.**

In October, we moved a motion at the Municipal Association of Victoria's State Council Meeting to lead a state-wide advocacy campaign calling on the government to increase funding for road maintenance.

Our motion was supported unanimously.

Small rural Councils like ours cannot afford to upkeep the road network, which has been destroyed by rain and flood.

We ask this inquiry to please investigate future funding opportunities for small rural shires to maintain and improve our road network.

In addition, the conversation regarding betterment needs to continue. Council's objective is not to replace like for like in every situation, particularly where history tells us that the existing structure is inadequate and will continue to fail. Council and the community want to do things better, however funding for betterment is required for this to occur.

We are keen to implement construction solutions that enhance the resilience of our road network, but we need to ensure we have the funding to do this.

We want a safe, climate resilient road network for road users in our municipality.



**Cr Laura Binks**  
**Mayor**  
**Strathbogie Shire Council**

- *Please see pictures included over the page.*



Chapmans Rd, Boho South



Mt Bernard Lane, Avenel



Pontings Lane, Bailieston



Kelvin View School Rd, Kelvin View



Tarcombe Rd, Avenel



Mitchellstown Rd, Mitchellstown