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Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee
 Inquiry into Climate Resilience
 Parliament House, Spring St, East Melbourne VIC 3002

Via e-submission: <https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/climateresilience>

To whom it may concern,

The Victorian Greenhouse Alliances are formal partnerships of local government and statutory authorities working collaboratively to drive climate action for emissions reduction and community resilience across 70 of Victoria's 79 municipalities. On behalf of our members, we are pleased to provide this submission to the Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee's **Inquiry into Climate Resilience**.

Councils are on the frontline responding to climate change as communities across Victoria experience the compounding impacts of successive flood, storm, fire, and heatwave events directly linked to the ongoing impacts of climate change. The risks that these climate-related events pose to critical community assets, and to human health, safety and livelihoods, have been well documented by previous state and federal inquiries, including the [2009 Bushfire Royal Commission](#), [Inquiry into the 2019-2020 Fire Season](#), [Inquiry into the 2022 Flood Event in Victoria](#), and [Inquiry into the implications of severe weather events on the national regional, rural, and remote road network 2023](#).

Local governments play a critical role managing high value assets on behalf of communities. Victorian councils are responsible for managing \$140 billion of community assets and infrastructure including roads, community buildings and facilities, parks, paths, tracks, and trails, all impacted by climate events.¹

A recent economic analysis of the direct risks to council-owned community assets from climate hazards in Greater Melbourne assessed average annual damages as currently \$90-120 million. This is expected to increase to around \$210-\$300 million by 2050 (a 150% increase) and \$400-\$540 million by 2100 (a 300% increase) under business as usual (i.e. no adaptation).² Analysis by Deloitte Access Economics found that the 2022 flood event in Northern Victoria alone caused \$432 million in damages to the local governments of Murrindindi, Moira, Strathbogie, and Mitchell, including damages to public infrastructure, losses of agricultural produce, business disruptions, residential and commercial damages, and emergency response costs. These are just four of the 63 Victorian LGAs that were impacted by this flood event.³

As the impacts of climate change become increasingly clear, it is critical that all levels of government must work together to accelerate the transition to net zero and beyond as fast as possible, while strengthening the resilience of our built environment and infrastructure for the benefit and prosperity of current and future generations. Adaptation is essential to climate change resilience, and will be the focus of this submission, but there is also a critical need for rapid emissions reduction, aligned with science-based targets, to reduce the rate and magnitude of climate change and its impacts on people and the built environment. Unless we all work

¹ <https://www.audit.vic.gov.au/report/results-2022-23-audits-local-government>

² Natural Capital Economics, 22 March 2023, Adaptive Community Assets: A report prepared for the Eastern Alliance for Greenhouse Action. ([link](#))

³ https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/494a5d/contentassets/af5f665989af4f6caa09a886d56ce0b0/reply-1.-qon-moira-shire-council-attach-1-deloitte_report_final-draft_august2023.pdf



together to reduce our emissions to zero and draw down past emissions, our adaptation efforts are likely to fail as climate change impacts outstrip our capacity to adapt meaningfully.

Our response to the Terms of Reference for this Inquiry focuses on:

- (c) the barriers facing Victoria in upgrading infrastructure to become more resilient to the impacts of climate change, including barriers in rebuilding or retrofitting infrastructure, including but not limited to, issues relating to insurance and barriers faced by local government;
- (d) the adequacy of the current Victorian planning system as it relates to its adaptation to, preparation for, and mitigation of climate change impacts; and
- (e) what more could be done to better prepare Victoria's built environment and infrastructure, and therefore the community, for future climate disaster events.

We have structured our submission around key opportunities and recommendations to address the barriers faced by local governments in the Victorian planning system, upgrading infrastructure for climate resilience, and preparing Victoria's built environment for future climate events.

1. Increasing access to financial support for asset risk assessments and resilience upgrades

The Local Government Act 2020 requires councils to promote the economic, social, and environmental sustainability of the municipal district, including mitigation and planning for climate change risks. Proactive risk assessment of assets in areas exposed to climate hazards is needed to enable councils to consider, plan, budget for, and implement infrastructure upgrades for climate resilience as part of their regular asset management operations. But the ability of Victorian councils to keep up with regular asset maintenance and renewal, and to invest in upgrades for climate resilience, is severely hampered by resource and funding constraints.

A survey of Victorian councils by FinPro found that the costs associated with climate change, extensive capital works, and cost shifting from higher levels of government are contributing to significant financial pressure on local governments that will ultimately result in a reduction of services and infrastructure investment for Victorian communities.⁴ These pressures are compounded by the impacts of rate capping, rising inflation, labour shortages, and higher construction and maintenance costs. In their recent State Budget, the Victorian Government has highlighted a 22 percent increase in infrastructure costs. In response, the Municipal Association of Victoria has noted that this is an even more challenging weight to bear for local government with rates capped at just 2.75 percent. Council budgets are further strained from responding to successive climate-related disaster events. These challenges are particularly acute for rural and regional councils disproportionately impacted by climate change.

There are currently limited funding opportunities from the state and federal government for climate risk mitigation assessments of infrastructure. A dedicated funding program is needed to support local governments to undertake asset risk assessments and improvements, with reference to future climate projections and risk modelling.

⁴ [24.29.01-FinPro-Minister-Local-Government-Local-Government-Financial-Sustainability-Jan-2024.pdf](#)

Recommendations for the Victorian Government

- 1A. Advocate to the Federal Government to significantly increase funding available for local and regional projects with a focus on risk mitigation and adaptation through the National Disaster Ready Fund.
- 1B. Develop a dedicated funding program to support local governments to undertake asset risk assessments and improvements, with reference to future climate projections and risk modelling.
- 1C. Establish guidelines and practice notes for local government asset managers in prioritising upgrades for integration into capital works programs and asset management plans.

2. Mainstreaming betterment for climate resilient assets

There is growing evidence that investment in betterment can prevent or reduce damages from disaster events, delivering resilience benefits for communities, and ultimately save money through avoided reconstruction costs. Since it was established in 2013, the Queensland Benefit Fund has resulted in \$397.5 million in avoided reconstruction costs from an investment of \$174 million. Of the 531 projects completed to date, 423 have subsequently been impacted by disaster events, but 79 per cent of those impacted have suffered no damage or only minor (superficial) damage.⁵

Local governments in Victoria experience significant barriers to accessing funds for betterment of damaged assets and infrastructure following disaster events. Under current Disaster Recovery and Funding Arrangements (DRFA) in Victoria, councils are funded to return assets and infrastructure to their pre-disaster state. Resilience improvements are often not funded, or only partially funded through the DRFA, with councils generally required to pay for these upgrades themselves.

Infrastructure improvements for disaster resilience can be costly, and most councils do not have the resources to invest in these upgrades following disaster events. The urgency with which essential infrastructure needs to be reinstated further limits opportunities to budget for and allocate funding to build back better.

Recommendations for the Victorian Government

- 2A. Adopt betterment as an eligible expense under the Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements and establish a Betterment Fund similar to the Queensland model.
- 2B. Work with the insurance industry to move towards "build back better" financing options for built environment adaptation.

⁵ Queensland Reconstruction Authority, 2023, Queensland Betterment Funds Paper, https://www.qra.qld.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-07/0805_betterment_funds_paper_2023_0.pdf

3. Increasing access to data and support for evidence-based decision-making

Data on risks

A whole-of-organisation approach to adaptation requires buy-in and action from all levels of council to effectively identify and address risks across different service areas. While some councils are already considering how climate change risks can be assessed and incorporated into everyday decision making, many others are struggling to identify and assess risks to different service areas, and to embed responses to climate change across the organisation.

The Greenhouse Alliances are developing a program, *Victorian Climate Resilient Councils (VCRC)*, that would provide a coordinated, state-wide program of support through a digital platform, resources, and direct assistance for Victorian councils to strengthen their knowledge, skills, and capacity to prepare for, manage and reduce climate change risks impacting local government service delivery, assets, and operations. Implementation of this program will require support and funding from other levels of government.

Governments at all levels must also work together to provide the best data available to decision-makers on the ground. The local government sector must be supported to acquire necessary climate risk data to enable decision making processes that reduce climate impacts, including data on future climate scenarios. Many councils in Victoria will require resourcing and further assistance to both gather risk and resilience data, and to ensure this is consistent across the state.

Improved localised data on future climate scenarios that is up to date and accessible is critical to supporting local government to assess risk and mainstream adaptation action. The *Victoria's Future Climate* tool could be used to house and access useful data, but this data needs to be kept up to date, data gaps need to be filled, and stakeholders including councils need assistance from the Victorian Government to access and use the data. Datasets such as surface temperatures and flood mapping based on a range of climate change projection scenarios and timelines, will be particularly useful for local planning. Councils, in both metropolitan and regional areas, need more granular risk data than what is currently provided in *Victoria's Future Climate* to make accurate decisions about climate impacts, for example on community assets such as roads. In response, many councils are looking to undertake their own more detailed risk assessments but need funding to support this along with consistent methodologies for risk assessment⁶.

Economic data on costs and benefits

Councils are aware of a significant data gap in relation to the financial costs and benefits of climate change risks and adaptation solutions. The *Adaptive Community Assets Project* has provided an initial assessment of the value of damages caused by climate hazards to council-owned community assets in Greater Melbourne, indicating significant increases in these values.⁷ As previously discussed, additional and ongoing funding is necessary to expand the scope and complexity of these assessments, enabling local governments across

⁶ In 2023, WAGA, for the Victorian Climate Resilient Councils (VCRC) development project, commissioned an expert assessment of climate risk assessment guidance for councils, which found that useful background and tangential guidance around climate risk assessment exists, but there is no fit-for-purpose guide to help councils undertake an assessment (Nation Partners, 1 September 2023, *Victorian Climate Resilient Councils – Desktop review of climate change risk assessment approaches*).

⁷ Natural Capital Economics, 22 March 2023, *Adaptive Community Assets: A report prepared for the Eastern Alliance for Greenhouse Action*. ([link](#))

Victoria to incorporate climate change considerations into their asset management practices and financial plans. Adequate data in this area would greatly facilitate planning and prioritisation of actions by all stakeholders, not only local government.

Systematic and consistent economic cost-benefit analysis and resource allocation overseen through a multi-level governance model would provide the most robust and transparent approach to investment in adaptation, ensuring that funding and resources are prioritised for the most at-risk locations and the most impactful adaptation options.

Data on vulnerable communities

Councils are also struggling with identifying their vulnerable and ‘at risk’ communities for the purposes of managing climate change risks and impacts and planning for climate resilience. Most council databases, including ‘vulnerable persons’ registers, only list people who already engage with council services. A state-based comprehensive database of vulnerable communities could fill this important data gap, which would facilitate more effective and faster responses in extreme weather events, and also help all levels of government to prioritise investment in adaptation in the built environment. The database could be developed with councils and other frontline organisations already working with ‘at risk’ communities and be based on vulnerability mapping. Much of the relevant data and mapping already exists, including in the Victorian Government’s own data and research projects.

There is strong support for data improvement to address these vulnerabilities in the Victorian Government’s own strategies, including:

- The Built Environment Adaptation Action Plan, which includes the principle to ‘reduce social disadvantage for vulnerable persons impacted by climate change’ and a specific action to ‘Develop support programs for vulnerable persons and communities highly exposed to climate change impacts to improve hazard resilience’, with specific responses articulated such as ‘Prepare a needs assessment ... to understand additional support measures needed for vulnerable persons living in highly exposed communities.’; and
- Victoria’s Emergency Management Strategic Roadmap, which states that the Government will invest in infrastructure to reduce risks and impacts and strengthen use of data and analytics.

Recommendations for the Victorian Government

3A. Support the implementation of the Victorian Climate Resilient Councils Program.

3B. Support the expansion of the Adaptive Community Assets project and cost-benefit analysis of climate change risks and adaptation solutions.

3C. Develop a state-based comprehensive database of vulnerable and ‘at risk’ communities.

4. Embedding and elevating climate change as a priority consideration at all levels of the Victorian planning system

The planning system has a critical role to play in ensuring that land use and development is sustainable, zero emissions, energy positive (where possible) and resilient to the impacts of climate change. Given the need for



transformational adaptation, climate change must be embedded and elevated as a priority consideration at all levels of the planning system, commensurate with the threat it poses.

In responding to climate change, planning needs to look to longer-term impacts and requires greater consideration of the impacts on future generations. This is sometimes incompatible with other objectives of planning, and with the interests and obligations of some decision-makers. Climate change considerations must be made explicit, or they will continue to be overlooked in favour of policy considerations that are more explicitly spelled out within planning schemes.

In 2021, the Greenhouse Alliances partnered with the Council Alliance for a Sustainable Built Environment (CASBE) to commission a research report on *Climate Change & Planning in Victoria: Ensuring Victoria's planning system effectively tackles climate change*.⁸ This report identifies a disconnect between high-level policy positions on climate change, both by state and local government, and the day-to-day decisions that are being made in Victoria's planning system.

The report outlines a raft of reform opportunities directly relevant to this Inquiry, including:

- Amending the Planning and Environment Act and the Climate Change Act to explicitly mandate addressing climate change at all levels of the planning process;
- Requiring every planning scheme amendment, at all levels of government, and at all levels of the planning framework, to include an assessment against relevant climate change considerations;
- Introducing mandatory climate change related minimum standards into planning schemes; and
- Adopting science-based targets for high level policy and aligning the planning system to the most up-to-date climate science.

We recommend the *Climate Change & Planning in Victoria: Ensuring Victoria's planning system effectively tackles climate change* report to the Committee. Implementation of its recommendations in full would significantly improve the adequacy of the current Victorian planning system as it relates to its adaptation to, preparation for, and mitigation of climate change impacts, and in doing so, protect current and future generations of Victorians from climate impacts.

We congratulate the State Government on the important step it has taken with the introduction of the *Climate Change and Energy Legislation Amendment (Renewable Energy and Storage Targets) Bill 2023* which outlines proposed amendments to the Planning and Environment Act 1987 to include:

- Definitions: In section 3(1) of the *Planning and Environment Act 1987* insert the following definition— "emissions reductions target means— (a) an interim emissions reduction target within the meaning of the Climate Action Act 2017; and 10 (b) a long-term emissions reduction target within the meaning of the Climate Action Act 2017;"
- Objectives: After section 4(2)(d) of the *Planning and Environment Act 1987* insert— "(da) to provide for explicit consideration of the policies and obligations of the State relating to climate change, including but not limited to greenhouse gas emissions reduction targets and the need to increase resilience to climate change, when decisions are made about the use and development of land;"

⁸ naga.org.au/uploads/9/0/5/3/9053945/final_report_-_climate_change_and_planning_in_victoria_-_november_2021.pdf

- Directions: Allows the Planning Minister to prepare ministerial directions prescribing more detail for when and how that consideration should be given.

Further measures will be required to operationalise this legislation and should include:

- Approving the Elevating Environmentally Sustainable Design (ESD) Targets Planning Policy Amendment lodged by 24 councils through the CASBE. Councils have introduced local ESD policies to tackle climate change and have submitted a planning scheme amendment to state government on how we can elevate ESD targets in the Victorian planning scheme to improve our response to climate change in the built environment.
- Implementing the ESD Roadmap in full to optimise energy efficiency, support renewable energy in updated residential development standards, and implement other sustainability measures.
- Collaborating and consulting with councils, CASBE, and the Victorian Greenhouse Alliances on further policy changes, including minimum energy and climate resilience standards for rental properties and existing homes at point of sale.

Recommendations for the Victorian Government

4A. Implement the recommendations in the *Climate Change & Planning in Victoria: Ensuring Victoria's planning system effectively tackles climate change* report in full.

4B. Approve the ESD planning scheme amendment lodged by 24 councils through CASBE, and release and implement the ESD Roadmap in full.

5. Capturing economic and resilience benefits through green infrastructure programs

Current rates of development and approaches to site coverage are resulting in a high level of urban and regional vegetation clearance. Despite the best efforts of local government, vegetation is being cleared at a faster rate than can be replaced in the public realm.

The loss of vegetation is impeding the state's ability to capture both climate resilience and economic benefits from protecting and increasing green and blue infrastructure to reduce the risks associated with the urban heat island effect as temperatures increase. Funding is required to provide councils with the necessary resources to reduce heat vulnerability, improve liveability and support biodiversity in a changing climate.

The productivity gains and health benefits of additional cooling through enhanced green infrastructure are estimated to be between ~\$530million and ~\$1.1billion per year (in present value terms) for the Melbourne Metropolitan Region in 2051.⁹ A conservative analysis of the cost-benefit-ratio suggests that for every dollar spent on urban greening in Melbourne, around \$4 in benefits are derived.¹⁰

To ensure these benefits are captured, the Victorian Government should adopt ambitious urban canopy cover targets for metropolitan and regional areas, and accelerate investment in street trees, parks and gardens, water sensitive urban design, and the treatment and reuse of wastewater, in partnership with local government.

⁹ <https://app.box.com/s/6fn893tq9sn9hjmikikrfgavgl5k75j8x>

¹⁰ Living Melbourne, [Priority urban greening analysis](#), June 2023.

A partnership approach between the state and local governments to enhance green and blue infrastructure for climate resilience in urban and regional areas could include the following elements:

- Setting ambitious goals for increased canopy and shrub cover.
- Use heat island and social vulnerability data and biodiversity outcomes to target important locations in metropolitan and regional areas.
- Apply the evidence base and First Nation’s knowledge to select appropriate climate-sensitive and resilient species.
- Address the skills shortage, provide training for existing professionals and support jobs.
- Support delivery through comprehensive community education and engagement, particularly around the protection of existing natural assets.

More adequate resourcing for compliance and enforcement to prevent illegal clearing of existing green infrastructure is also required. A 2022 VAGO report states that Victoria currently loses over 10,000 ha of native vegetation each year to illegal removals.¹¹ Local governments face significant financial and resource barriers to undertake compliance and enforcement under the *Planning and Environment Act 1987*, particularly when a more serious penalty is warranted requiring prosecution at the Magistrates Court. This involves substantial time and human and financial resources that most councils, especially smaller and rural and regional councils cannot afford.

Recommendations for the Victorian Government

5. Capture the economic and resilience benefits of urban and regional cooling through comprehensive green and blue infrastructure programs in partnership with local governments.

6. Increasing coordination of and support for emergency management services

Well-coordinated and supported emergency management services are essential to maintain the safety and resilience of critical community and private assets and facilities, especially in relation to preparing for, managing, and recovering from extreme weather events and disasters. While emergency management is an essential community service in itself, its role in the resilience of all asset classes should be taken into account in this Inquiry.

The community emergency risk assessment (CERA) is an essential tool and process for identifying and evaluating the physical exposure and vulnerabilities of assets. However, much of the data used to assess risks in the emergency management sector relates to historical natural hazard patterns, which cannot be relied on in the CERA without also taking into account modelling of future risk. The stakeholders conducting the CERA also do not necessarily have access to the best or most up-to-date data, and do not adequately understand how to integrate climate science into the consideration of risk in the CERA. Nor does the tool or process mandate that climate science should be taken into account in any systematic way. The City of Greater Dandenong, on behalf of and as part of the development of the Victorian Climate Resilient Councils Program, commissioned an expert assessment of the CERA’s treatment of climate change risks: *Climate Change, Future Risk and Emergency Management: a review of Victoria’s community emergency risk assessment process* (August 2023).

¹¹ <https://www.audit.vic.gov.au/report/offsetting-native-vegetation-loss-private-land?section=>

The assessment details these and related problems with the CERA and makes a number of specific relevant recommendations, which directly support other recommendations made in this submission, including the following:

- Better alignment of the CERA with the National Emergency Risk Assessment Guidelines.
- Improved data and use of data to inform the CERA process.
- Victorian Government to undertake detailed state and regional climate change projections and impact assessments that can inform the regional and municipal levels.

Recommendations for the Victorian Government

6. Implement recommendations to improve the CERA included in *Climate Change, Future Risk and Emergency Management: a review of Victoria's community emergency risk assessment process*.

7. Investing in the resilience of facilities used for shelter and emergency relief

There is a specific and urgent need for greater investment in the climate resilience of emergency relief centres that support communities after emergency events such as bushfires, floods and storms, and other community facilities that could be used as shelters in extreme weather such as heatwaves. Assessments of council-owned or managed community facilities have shown that many of these facilities will not perform effectively during extreme weather events.¹²

As mentioned, councils' existing budgets are constrained to supporting upgrades for climate resilience only when other building upgrades are required, if at all, and often only when additional grant funding is available, such as the Commonwealth's Community Energy Upgrade Fund. Even with this additional funding, it is often only large facilities, such as aquatic centres, which are upgraded sufficiently, leaving out smaller facilities such as local halls and community centres that are critical hubs during and after disaster events for community relief and recovery efforts. A statewide program of investment is needed to enable councils to upgrade these facilities and should include investment in energy solutions, such as battery and solar systems at these sites.

Recommendations for the Victorian Government

7. Develop a specific program of investment for climate resilience in emergency relief centres and other community facilities used as relief and recover hubs.

8. A multilevel governance approach to climate adaptation and resilience

Local governments play a critical role driving climate adaptation and mitigation policy and action and managing high value assets and services on behalf of communities. The local government sector brings a wealth of experience and knowledge to Victoria's response to climate change, having spent decades driving adaptation and mitigation policies and programs for the benefit of local communities. But councils are too often seen as a

¹² For example, WAGA's 'Heatwave Safe Spaces' project, 2022-2023, assessed community facilities in the west of Melbourne, such as neighbourhood houses and libraries, for their suitability as places where the community could retreat in extreme heat. Most facilities were found to require significant upgrading before they could be used as in that way.

vehicle for implementing fragmented policies set by state and federal governments, without adequate support and resourcing.

Adaptation works best if the solutions are designed and implemented as close as possible to where the impacts are being felt. Local communities cannot address their climate change risks and impacts without significant help, and councils must be empowered to co-design, develop, and implement local adaptation action.

A multilevel governance approach that includes local, state, and federal governments – as outlined in the *Many Hands Make Light Work* report – would see more cohesive, unified work between governments, with less duplication.¹³ This approach would help build a more resilient Victoria by ensuring that councils have a seat at the decision-making table, and empowering all spheres of government to fulfil their climate resilience and emissions reduction goals through effective coordination and resourcing.

The Victorian Greenhouse Alliances are also an established vehicle for coordination and collaboration at the regional level, assisting their member councils with internal capacity building, cross-council projects and research, and engagement with other levels of government and other sectors. We welcome further opportunities for strategic partnerships with the state and federal government on adaptation policy co-creation and implementation for climate resilience.

Recommendations for the Victorian Government

8. Work with the federal and local governments to re-set roles and responsibilities through establishing a multilevel governance approach to climate adaptation.

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss any aspects of this submission in further detail.

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¹³ https://citiespowerpartnership.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Many-Hands-Make-Light-Work_Screen-Singles.pdf

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This submission has been approved through the Victorian Greenhouse Alliances approval processes but has not been formally adopted by individual members. The submission does not necessarily represent the views of all members.

