

# **PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE**

## **Inquiry into the 2023–24 Financial and Performance Outcomes**

Melbourne – Friday 22 November 2024

### **MEMBERS**

Sarah Connolly – Chair

Nicholas McGowan – Deputy Chair

Michael Galea

Mathew Hilakari

Lauren Kathage

Bev McArthur

Danny O’Brien

Aiv Puglielli

Meng Heang Tak



**WITNESSES**

Peta McCammon, Secretary,

Argiri Alisandratos, Deputy Secretary, Disability, Fairness and Emergency Management,

Danny O’Kelly, Deputy Secretary, Community Operations and Practice Leadership,

Annette Lancy, Deputy Secretary, Children and Families,

Simon Newport, Chief Executive Officer, Homes Victoria,

Melanie Heenan, Deputy Secretary, Family Safety Victoria,

Drew Warne-Smith, Deputy Secretary, System Reform, Workforce and Engagement,

Cynthia Lahiff, Chief Financial Officer,

Raylene Harradine, Deputy Secretary, Aboriginal Self-Determination and Outcomes,

Carley Northcott, Executive Director, Disability, Complex Needs and Emergency Management,

Gerry Goswell, Executive Director, Community Inclusion, Veterans and Youth,

Kate Berry, Executive Director, Policy and Delivery, Fairer Victoria,

Sherri Bruinhout, Executive Director, Homelessness and Housing Support, and

Louise Gartland, Executive Director, People and Culture, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing.

**The CHAIR:** I declare open this hearing of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee. I ask that mobile telephones please be turned to silent.

On behalf of the Parliament the committee is conducting this Inquiry into the 2023–24 Financial and Performance Outcomes. Its aim is to gauge what the government achieved in 2023–24 compared to what the government planned to achieve.

All evidence taken by this committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. However, comments repeated outside of this hearing may not be protected by this privilege.

As Chair I expect that committee members will be respectful towards witnesses, the Victorian community joining the hearing via the live stream and other committee members.

Witnesses will be provided with a proof version of the transcript to check, and verified transcripts, presentations and handouts will be placed on the committee’s website.

I welcome the Secretary for the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing Ms Peta McCammon – you are very welcome here – as well as officials who have joined you today. Secretary, I invite you to make an opening statement and presentation of no more than 10 minutes, and this will be followed by questions from the committee. Your time starts now.

**Visual presentation.**

**Peta McCAMMON:** Thank you, Chair, and the committee for the opportunity to present on the financial and performance outcomes for the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing. I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting today and pay my respects to elders past and present.

Our department works to support the safety and inclusion of all Victorians. We work to prevent harm and discrimination, improve equity and deliver social and housing support to Victorians who need it, including after

major emergencies. There is no single way to do this, and people are the experts of their own experience, and this requires us to continually listen and engage with the communities we serve.

Listed on this slide are the five outcomes all our work is directed towards. In the rest of this presentation I will talk through how we are addressing each of these, but first I want to talk through some of the challenges. Demand for government support services is increasing as the state's population grows and ages. Even with thousands more social homes created, average wait times for social housing are not where we would like them to be due to demand. Compared to last year the number of utility relief grants distributed went up by 15 per cent. Child protection reports went up 8.5 per cent. The Orange Door assisted 8.5 per cent more people. Assistance for people experiencing homelessness went up 4 per cent, and within that, the number of people assisted to prevent homelessness due to family violence went up almost 7 per cent. We are seeing this increasing need across every community and service area we support.

The department remains committed to building more and better quality homes to increase housing supply to ensure Victorians have safe, secure and affordable housing. Investment is focused on making homelessness rare, brief and non-recurring. This includes increased investment to address homelessness among First Peoples, with the establishment of two Aboriginal-specific entry points and multidisciplinary teams.

In 2023–24 we added nearly 3000 new social homes to our stock, the highest number achieved in the last 10 years. On 30 June 2024, 9600 homes had been completed or were underway as part of the landmark Big Housing Build, representing 80 per cent of the target for 12,000 new social and affordable homes. More than 4400 households have moved into brand new, accessible and energy-efficient homes. This growth has been offset by higher than expected lease hand backs, along with divestments and demolitions, which over time will deliver more social housing. That is why we did not meet our target of 91,248 total social housing homes.

Allocations to social housing have grown by 63 per cent over the last four years. There have been over 7000 households allocated into long-term social housing each year for the past two financial years. Of particular significance, allocation to family violence priority types are up 92 per cent over four years. We have not seen allocations occur at this rate since the introduction of the Victorian housing register as a single waitlist in 2019.

The department is responsible for the delivery of statutory child protection and care services, and this means attracting and retaining quality child protection practitioners. Over a four-year period from 2019–20 to 2023–24, the child protection workforce increased by 477 FTE. This represents growth of 23 per cent. I will speak to how we are working to increase the workforce shortly. The department is also responsible for earlier intervention and diversionary family services. More than 30,000 families have been supported by a workforce of over 2000 practitioners.

We have continued to deliver the road map for reform. This included working with communities, the child and family services sector and people with lived experience. We have prepared for the implementation of the statement of recognition Act, which acknowledges that Aboriginal people are best placed to make decisions and deliver services which protect the best interests of Aboriginal children. We already have two programs, Aboriginal Children in Aboriginal Care and the Community Protecting Boorais pilot, gaining great traction in this area. A growing number of earlier intervention service models continue to be delivered, increasing participation in universal services and improving family functioning, parental confidence and community connectedness. Programs also continue to support recovery and healing and improve outcomes for children and young people in care. This includes implementing access to therapeutic supports for all children in residential care, with 75 per cent providing this support in 2023–24. All this work would be undone if our workforce is not sustainable and our systems not effective.

You can see we are trialling many different approaches to ensure we are at the forefront of service delivery. A highlight was the launch of Switch to Social Work, a new earn-and-learn program designed to attract career switchers to the children and family services sector. Successful applicants complete a masters of social work, specialising in child and family practice, while getting practical experience. The department successfully leveraged off this program and worked with La Trobe University to create a shorter course, Switch to Child Protection, to provide a pathway for experienced professionals to change careers and move to child protection. Once recruited, the department supports the child protection workforce through extensive professional

development and tailored wellbeing services. These supports help us to retain our practitioners to do the important and challenging work we ask them to do.

In 2023–24 the Orange Door supported more than 206,000 Victorians, including over 90,000 children. However, tragically, more than 50 women have allegedly been murdered this year by a man in instances of gendered violence in Australia. I want to acknowledge that behind those numbers I am talking about individual women, each of whom had their own life and whose loss is enduring to their loved ones. We continue to work to prevent family violence at the source, acknowledging this is an intergenerational undertaking. Many of our programs are nation leading and are creating change. The family violence multi-agency risk assessment and management framework is a nation-leading approach to addressing family violence. It aims to establish a shared understanding of family violence, guiding more than 400,000 professionals across a range of services such as education, health, child and family and justice services, to be able to identify, assess and respond to family violence. It has been found to have had a significant impact in improving collaboration across these sectors and remains a focus of national interest from other states that see Victoria as setting the benchmark.

From a community perspective, the strengthening multicultural and faith communities grant program empowers community-led approaches to prevent family violence and violence against women, including engaging with men and boys and faith and community leaders to create positive change. And starting in the home, the adolescent family violence in the home program provides family-based case management and group-based support to young people using violence against a parent or carer.

I have mentioned a few initiatives to support Aboriginal Victorians already, but it is important for us to call out this work as a priority. We are committed to transforming our systems, services and policies to create lasting change and practical outcomes for Aboriginal Victorians, and largely what that means is embedding self-determination in everything that we do. Since 2020 government has progressively increased investment in Aboriginal community controlled organisations, and our dedicated Aboriginal self-determination and outcomes division continues to drive critical work to progress our commitments to closing the gap. We remain committed to supporting the Yoorrook Justice Commission's work and the upcoming treaty process. We are also ensuring our staff are educated about treaty and treaty processes and have implemented governance structures to support treaty negotiations.

Nationally and internationally, social cohesion was challenged in 2023–24 for many reasons. This greatly impacted the communities we support. As a department, we work to solidify and strengthen social cohesion through inclusive policy, recognition and support of community expertise and enabling equitable access and participation in programs and services. Our department recognises that individuals and communities have varying needs and experience systems and services in different ways. People with a disability form 18.4 per cent of the Victorian population. A growing life expectancy means our population is ageing. Just over one in 20 adult Victorians openly identify as being part of the LGBTIQ+ community. And Victoria is one of the most culturally and linguistically diverse places in the world.

A significant focus of the department's work is on partnering with communities and key stakeholders to address material needs – barriers – and improve outcomes for all Victorians. This slide outlines some of the key initiatives and tangible ways that the department has done this in 2023–24. Our approach is to make deliberate efforts to attract more diverse leaders through workforce initiatives and capability-building programs; intervene where structural and social barriers exist, such as funding Changing Places toilet facilities; and continue to bring the community together in a safe and secure ways, such as our long-running support for the neighbourhood house coordination program, seniors festival, Victorian Pride events and the establishment of new youth spaces with and for the young people of Victoria.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a short summary of the department's activities in 2023–24. We look forward to responding to questions from the committee.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much, Secretary. The first round of questions is going to go to Mrs McArthur.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you, team. I go to budget paper 4, pages 128 and 129. The initial Big Housing Build – \$5.3 billion – was to construct more than 12,000 new homes, with 9300 new social housing homes and 2900 affordable and low-cost homes. Total funding for new and existing projects in the

2023–24 budget was \$4.7 billion, not \$5.3 billion, as promised by the government in 2020. How much of the \$4.7 billion went towards new homes and not upgrades?

**Peta McCAMMON:** Simon, I might ask you.

**Simon NEWPORT:** With regard to the Big Housing Build, the change there in the allocation is between capital and recurrent or capital and output. There was a decision by government last year to move more delivery to the community housing sector through the Social Housing Growth Fund, so the dollars have not changed at all; it is just that there is now more money being reported through output or through recurrent expenditure, not through the balance sheet. With regard to your question on upgrades, there is no money from the Big Housing Build, to my understanding, that is devoted to upgrades.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Thank you. Has any land been purchased from private owners on which to build government social homes?

**Simon NEWPORT:** I do not have those details specifically in front of me, but yes, there is an acquisition program, particularly for homes, which obviously would involve buying properties from the private sector. I would have to provide more detail to you on that.

**Bev McARTHUR:** If you could take that on notice – what the cost of that is – please.

**Simon NEWPORT:** Sure.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Why was this done instead of utilising existing government land?

**Simon NEWPORT:** There is an extensive program to use existing government land. A classic example is Pound Road in Colac, which I am sure you would be familiar with. That is from another government department. We are obviously constantly looking at our portfolio to see how we can best use that land. We do try to keep land acquisitions to a minimum for obvious reasons, because it erodes the ability to build more homes. However, we are very mindful of expanding our footprint at Homes Victoria, because as new suburbs emerge, we want to make sure that social and affordable housing is delivered right across Victoria, so at times there will be a need to acquire land.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Can you build them cheaper than the private sector?

**Simon NEWPORT:** No, but our unit cost has come down about \$85,000 a home in the last 12 months. In terms of our base build costs, yes, we are comparable.

**Bev McARTHUR:** What is the breakdown of actual funding under the new and existing projects that make up the Big Housing Build?

**Simon NEWPORT:** Sorry, can you repeat that question?

**Bev McARTHUR:** What is the breakdown of actual funding under the new and existing projects that make up the Big Housing Build?

**Simon NEWPORT:** I am not quite sure how to answer that question. There has been no change to the budget. So when you say ‘between new and existing’, I can tell you the change between delivered versus community housing delivered, but I am not quite sure what your question is driving at, to be honest. Can I get you to rephrase it?

**Bev McARTHUR:** Perhaps if you can find us that information.

**Simon NEWPORT:** Yes, okay.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Do you want to give it to us now?

**Simon NEWPORT:** No, if you could –

**Bev McARTHUR:** Yes, take it on notice. That would be terrific. How much of the Big Housing Build was spent on consultancy or output funding?

**Simon NEWPORT:** The consultants' information is disclosed in the annual report. I do not have the specific breakdown between every program.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Could you find that for us?

**Simon NEWPORT:** Yes, we certainly could.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Thank you. If you would just give it to us on notice, that would be terrific. What was the \$81.5 million for base housing renewal in 2023–24 spent on?

**Simon NEWPORT:** That base program is to deliver, if you like, a base capital, new supply and an upgrade program that is, if you like, self-funded from within Homes Victoria – as opposed to separate programs of work, perhaps, like the Big Housing Build or the Regional Housing Fund et cetera. So that is, if you like, our core building program. I could get you the break-up of individual components of that, but effectively it is new supply and some upgrades.

**Bev McARTHUR:** That would be great. Did any of the funding come out of the Big Housing Build?

**Simon NEWPORT:** For that program, no. That is separate from the Big Housing Build.

**Bev McARTHUR:** What was the \$15.9 million allocated to social housing pipeline projects in the budget spent on?

**Simon NEWPORT:** I would have to get back to you on the \$15.9 million explicitly, as to what that program was –

**Bev McARTHUR:** Okay, we would be grateful for that information. Thank you. Also, did that funding come out of the Big Housing Build?

**Simon NEWPORT:** No, the Big Housing Build is quite a defined program and separately reported.

**Bev McARTHUR:** What was – you might need to take this on notice too, at the rate we are going – the \$24 million allocated to minor capital works in 2023–24 spent on?

**Simon NEWPORT:** That I would have to check, but normally that is upgrades.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Okay, And that, I am assuming, did not come out of the Big Housing Build?

**Simon NEWPORT:** Correct.

**Bev McARTHUR:** The 2023–24 budget allocated \$26.7 million for refuge and crisis accommodation. How many new homes have we built under this program?

**Simon NEWPORT:** There have been 15 refuges built so far and seven either in construction or in design right now.

**Bev McARTHUR:** How much has been paid to accommodation providers?

**Simon NEWPORT:** I might need to call upon my homelessness Executive Director to answer that question, if that is okay, or we could take that on notice, whichever you prefer. Sherri, did you want to answer that one? Yes, it might be a good idea.

**Nick McGOWAN:** There were seven. Can you provide the list of where those seven are in terms of suburb – clearly not address.

**Sherri BRUINHOUT:** Mel, you have got that, haven't you?

**Bev McARTHUR:** The 15 refuges that have been built – give us the list.

**Sherri BRUINHOUT:** We have got that here now.

**Melanie HEENAN:** If you are referring, Mrs McArthur, to the 22 new core-and-cluster refuges, so the refuge build program – is that what you are referring to?

**Bev McARTHUR:** Yes, the refuge and crisis accommodation that was allocated in the budget. How many of those new homes have been built under this program – 15?

**Melanie HEENAN:** Just as a point of distinction, they are not a new home; they are a new core-and-cluster refuge. They are to support victim-survivors of family violence and their children who are escaping family violence at that very serious end. They are at risk of very serious harm. The builds are actually for a core-and-cluster refuge, which allows them to come into a refuge and have discrete accommodation. There are separate units where they can have a very homelike environment for usually women and their children and their pets. And there is a core to the cluster, which is where all of the services are available to victim-survivors to be what they call in reach, so that they can provide case management support, possibly nursing support, perhaps education support for young children who might be in refuge. Fifteen of those 22 core-and-cluster refuges have been handed over and are being operated, and there are the remaining seven that my colleague was just referring to in terms of where they are in their final builds.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Yes. We will just take that detail of geography on notice.

**Simon NEWPORT:** Sure. I can certainly answer where the seven are yet to be finished.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Okay. All right.

**Simon NEWPORT:** There is one at Melton South, which is handing over any day now, and Bairnsdale, within about five months. There are two facilities at Warrnambool, one at Horsham and two more: one in southern Melbourne – the site is yet to be acquired – and western Melbourne, yet to be acquired.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Okay. Thank you. And did we have a figure on how much you have paid to accommodation providers?

**Simon NEWPORT:** Sherri, that is for you.

**Melanie HEENAN:** If we are talking about crisis accommodation providers, those are generally motel accommodations.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Yes, exactly.

**Melanie HEENAN:** What I can tell you is that the funding for crisis accommodation, which is in effect motel accommodation, comes out of crisis brokerage and flexible support packages. We are getting better and closer at being able to distinguish what those costs are. But because flexible support packages and crisis brokerage also cover a range of other items for victim-survivors and for children, who are also victim-survivors often in their own right, we cannot distinguish the specific funding for motel accommodation. But we are getting closer, and we will be able to distinguish that from the different systems that they are currently sitting in over time. We are certainly keen to do that.

**Bev McARTHUR:** So you are not able to provide us with a costing of how much you spent?

**Sherri BRUINHOUT:** I might be able to assist you. Thank you for the question. Within the homelessness service system, crisis accommodation, as you may be aware, is a very fundamental part of the service that we offer –

**Bev McARTHUR:** How much is being spent on it?

**Sherri BRUINHOUT:** There are a variety of ways to answer that question. There are crisis accommodation facilities that are staffed by staff members 24/7 to provide support. Is that the kind of question you are asking? Or are you asking more about the brokerage of when we are purchasing crisis accommodation?

**Bev McARTHUR:** Well, whatever varieties you have got.



**Sherri BRUINHOUT:** Okay. Well, let me try and help you with that. Crisis accommodation that is brokered through private providers, like hotel accommodation – where people are coming in seeking somewhere to stay for the night and need a couple of nights accommodation, homelessness providers are funded at around \$15 million a year.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Fifteen million dollars.

**Sherri BRUINHOUT:** That is significantly lower than previous years, when there was a very concerted effort during COVID-19 to be able to provide people experiencing homelessness with somewhere to stay during the pandemic. If you are thinking about crisis accommodation services that have social workers, staff to be there 24/7, Victoria has 24 youth refuges. We have three large crisis congregate services for adults. We have a number of refuges for women who are experiencing homelessness that are not experiencing family violence necessarily to the same extent that my colleague was giving you information about. Youth refuges are about \$25 million a year. The three crisis accommodation services that are in the CBD: we have got a 60-bed facility in Southbank for singles – men and women – that is run by Launch Housing. We have Flagstaff accommodation in North Melbourne. That is run by the Salvation Army, and that facilitates accommodation for about 55 single men. Then we also have Ozanam House, which is run by VincentCare in North Melbourne, and that accommodates about 60 people as well.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Do you have distinct refuges where women only can reside – no men can access?

**Sherri BRUINHOUT:** Certainly we have a number of different responses for women. For single women there are a variety of ways that we can provide crisis accommodation. We have single younger women crisis in the youth refuges. Predominantly for women with accompanying children the crisis accommodation we use homes called the THM crisis program – sorry to use an acronym – which is the transitional housing management crisis accommodation program. Generally, that is not a large facility-style crisis accommodation. Generally, that is houses within the local community where women and their children can live. You would walk down the street and you would not necessarily know that that is a crisis accommodation facility. So I hope that answers your question.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Yes, thanks. Maybe Secretary, what is the Social Housing Growth Fund, and does it receive funding from the Big Housing Build?

**Peta McCAMMON:** It does not receive funding from the Big Housing Build; it is separate. But Simon can talk through the details.

**Simon NEWPORT:** Yes, thanks. The Secretary is right of course. It is a separate fund, and it is jointly administered between Department of Treasury and Finance and Homes Victoria. But it is considered part of the Big Housing Build delivery channel 3.

**Bev McARTHUR:** It is considered?

**Simon NEWPORT:** It is considered as part of because it is delivered by the community housing provider. Not all elements of the Social Housing Growth Fund are included in the Big Housing Build, but there is a portion which is. So it runs independently from it but there is a subset of it which is delivered and considered part of the Big Housing Build, and that was the information or the dollars I was referring to earlier that were delivered internally to be delivered by the community housing sector. That was the change that was made last year.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Okay. So who are the recipients of the funding, and how many homes have been built or will be built?

**Simon NEWPORT:** The registered community housing providers are the recipients. It can either be in direct capital grants or it can be in availability payment, so an annual payment – a payment typically over 20 to 30 years depending upon the program. Last year there were 917 homes delivered through that part of the Big Housing Build, through the association growth fund component of that.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Do those assets sit with those organisations or are they assets of the state?

**Simon NEWPORT:** No, they sit in the community housing balance sheet. We have generally, in simple terms, a caveatable interest on those properties.

**Nick McGOWAN:** What purpose is a caveat?

**Simon NEWPORT:** To make sure if they decide to do anything with it – redevelop, sell or what have you – we have got a right to approve or not.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Okay. So we go to the old chestnut that appears this whole meeting: why has a Treasurer's advance of \$156.6 million been required for the delivery of the government's commitment to boost social housing supply? Why weren't these funds allocated in the budget?

**Simon NEWPORT:** I probably cannot answer the second part of that question other than it is pretty standard practice for us to be able to go and seek, through ministerial letter to the Treasurer, release of funds as and when we need them. Certainly in my experience that is quite typical.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Under which project stream does independent living homes partnerships, such as Mind Australia, belong?

**Simon NEWPORT:** Do you want to answer that one?

**Sherri BRUINHOUT:** That is a great question. Under the Social Housing Growth Fund there are a variety of different calls for submissions, focusing on different client cohorts. Under the Big Housing Build there is an acknowledgement at Homes Victoria that we understand that there is a great need for social housing and there are many cohorts that are requiring a social housing response. However, there are particular cohorts that at times we might like to drill down on and be able to create opportunities for funding rounds that are for specific client cohorts. So the round that I believe you are referring to was a round that looked at being able to provide housing outcomes through community housing providers for people with particular needs, including people with disabilities.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Especially in the Torquay area, where you put it entirely in the wrong place, right beside a school. From the commencement of the Big Housing Build until June 2024, social housing dwelling stock numbers increased from 85,969 to 89,501. At a cost of \$1.5 billion, it equates to about \$420,000 per dwelling and does not include the land. The bulk of these dwellings have been one bedroom. Secretary, if a two-bedroom home, average 70 square metres, with top quality and luxury fittings is around \$260,000, why is it costing the government an average \$200,000 more for a one- and two-bedroom apartment?

**Peta McCAMMON:** Simon can go through some of the unit costing work, I think, of HomesVic, but that movement of numbers is a net movement of numbers. As I said in my presentation, we have had a number of new homes come into the system, but we have also had homes, particularly ones that we leased during COVID, that we needed to hand back, and also some demolition. So that is a calculation we would not accept. But I might ask Mr Newport about some of the unit cost work at HomesVic.

**Simon NEWPORT:** Obviously, what we are building is a wide range of properties from, yes, one and two beds up to large family homes, detached and anything in between. The price per square metre and then price per property that you are talking about varies considerably between apartments and, if you like, separate standalone homes. A standalone home for the Regional Housing Fund, because it is going to be delivered, we would expect, on more broadacre and not so much in apartments, that averages about \$6000 to \$7000 per square metre, whereas apartments are now getting closer to \$10,000 per square metre. For a 65-square-metre typical two-bedroom apartment, that is getting up towards \$650,000. That cost is completely the same. We do a comparison constantly with the private sector, and that is right on the money for that. You will see a range of houses. We can deliver one-bedroom and two-bedroom standalone properties with either a 4 or even a high 300,000 in front of it, but the average works out to be, as you have indicated, just over \$400,000. But it is a wide range, depending on the typology of the product you are delivering.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Well, according to the Homes Victoria website's 'What's happening in my area?' page between 23 and 24, 4026 homes were completed. Does 'completed' mean these dwellings were built or built and spot purchased?

**Simon NEWPORT:** It means all homes delivered, so it will be built as well as if there has been a property acquired.

**Bev McARTHUR:** How many of those 4026 homes are affordable or market homes?

**Simon NEWPORT:** I do not believe any would be market. I would have to get back to you, but I would be pretty certain there would be no market properties, and I would have to get you the split between social and affordable. The vast majority would be social.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Okay. Thank you.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Would you come back to us on that?

**Simon NEWPORT:** Of course.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Yes, thank you. Is the Victorian affordable housing program part of the social housing accelerator program?

**The CHAIR:** Apologies, Mrs McArthur.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Maybe take it on notice.

**The CHAIR:** No, Mrs McArthur, that question will not be taken on notice. We will be coming back this way. Mr Galea.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon, Secretary and officials. Thank you for joining us. Secretary, I would also like to talk about the very important issue of housing, specifically with regard to – perhaps this might be for you as well, Mr Newport – maintenance for existing public housing properties. I note that the annual report, page 47, makes some references to that. What sort of work has been delivered and what work particularly is being done to improve maintenance outcomes for public housing tenants?

**Simon NEWPORT:** Thank you very much for that question. Combined with the department, we deliver upgrades, responsive maintenance and non-urgent maintenance to the entire roughly 65,000 public houses that are in the system. We delivered just shy of 2000 upgrades last year as well as delivering about a thousand orders every single day across the state in terms of maintenance – so just short of 360,000 orders. At a time – sorry, I just had trouble hearing. We have delivered significant improvements in maintenance over that time. There has been a 27 per cent reduction in – sorry, let me just check that. I think it is a 27 per cent reduction in complaints in the last 12 months. We have brought back 1093 homes in the last 12 months that were vacant that are no longer vacant, and they are now housing Victorians. We have seen renter satisfaction improve in both urgent and non-urgent. We are now above target for urgent maintenance, and we saw a lift from about 56 through to 71 per cent, and we are looking to improve that this year for non-urgent. I would point out that non-urgent maintenance is particularly more challenging to get a higher satisfaction rate because there is an expectation gap at times as to what you will deliver versus perhaps – as an example, someone might be looking for an entire kitchen, whereas we might say, ‘Look, we have to replace the doors or perhaps the oven but there’s no need to replace the whole kitchen.’ It is very hard to get a 100 per cent satisfaction rate if people have their heart set on a kitchen. But we have seen significant improvements in satisfaction and, as I said, complaints are down.

On top of properties being brought back, which is also a new low for us in terms of vacancies, we are also putting in a new maintenance contract in the next 12-month period, which I think will deliver more efficiencies and better services for Victorians who live in our properties. I will give you an example of some of the reforms that are taking place right now. We will have renters in the future who will be able to electronically interact with the maintenance providers to find out more. Like you would expect in a lot of other businesses, they will be able to find out when someone is coming to their door to do the work as opposed to ringing, getting an order and someone then does it by phone. Now they will be able to check up on when that work is going to be happening, and it will enable, we think, real improvements in terms of not only productivity but just renter satisfaction, because they will not have to wait home all day, as a classic example.

**Michael GALEA:** The 8 am to 6 pm window, for example.

**Simon NEWPORT:** Exactly, which will also help with access. Because sometimes access is one of our biggest challenges – we book an appointment, show up and then perhaps the person is not home, so we have to go and redo that again.

**Michael GALEA:** Yes.

**Simon NEWPORT:** So there are been significant improvements in maintenance. Probably the biggest one I would allude to as well is – for want of another phrase – the maintenance backlog. That absolutely came out of the back end of COVID. I think we can firmly say from a statistical basis now that that backlog is completely gone. You have heard me say there is roughly about a thousand orders every single day. We are down to 11,000 orders – that is in total. Two years ago it was 92,000, last year it was about 54,000, and now it is down to 11,000. That is pretty much at a run rate – by the time someone rings up, you commission the work, someone goes out and does it, they invoice you and that invoice is processed, that is going to take more than 11 days. So we are pretty much at no day-to-day maintenance backlog.

**Michael GALEA:** Yes. Thank you. That is quite a significant drop from 92,000 to 11,000 maintenance orders, so that is good to see. By the sounds of it, the other work that you have done in this budget period as well will hopefully set you up for those results to be further optimised.

**Simon NEWPORT:** Yes.

**Michael GALEA:** Another question that Mrs McArthur actually asked was about social housing in regional Victoria, and I note that there is the Regional Housing Fund statewide. I am wondering if you could talk me through the results that program has seen over the budget period.

**Simon NEWPORT:** The year just gone was the first year of the Regional Housing Fund since it was announced I think pretty much right at the start of the financial year. The government has announced that they will deliver at least 1300 homes, and I think we will do better than that, but again, we are mindful that that is the target and we have got to deliver that first. In that first year we wanted to make sure that we did extensive consultation with councils, community, community housing providers and homelessness providers, and we did that, but we did not want to just do consultation. We also did extensive design and contract procurement work. We have the first tranche of 250 modern methods of construction – effectively modular construction – which will be really helpful in the regional areas. That is due to be contracted within the next few weeks. We have gone ahead and done an extensive piece of work to do that, so that is real progress. In the meantime we took a decision to roll out a rapid acquisition program of 50 homes. That was requested specifically from the homelessness sector to link into the homelessness sector, and you heard Sherri allude earlier to THM, transitional housing. And they have now been acquired, any works that had to be done, and they have been brought online already and that has been extremely welcome.

We also took the decision to bring back some properties. 130 properties have now been brought back as a rapid response, because whilst there are properties sitting there that we can bring back – and these are extensively damaged properties. These are not just a bit of patch and paint and some carpet, these are properties that have suffered perhaps some significant fire damage. But if they have got good bones, good structure, a good roof, we can bring them back at a reasonable price, and we did that. Last year we brought back 180 homes. Even though we did not have a running start, we started from that position, we now have 180 homes that are back on now housing Victorians, and we will deliver the rest of the program in the coming years.

**Michael GALEA:** We look forward to seeing the results of that program continuing. Thank you, Mr Newport. Secretary, equality is also another function of the department that you oversee, and one particular output that is reflected in this year's department performance statement is the number of people engaged through a trans and gender-diverse peer support program. I see that the department has exceeded the target for that program – in fact exceeded it almost by a degree of 2.5 times. Can you just tell me a little bit more about that program, why there has been such demand for it and the outcomes that are being derived from it?

**Peta McCAMMON:** Thank you. I think Argiri is best. But we are obviously really proud of the work that gets done through the equality unit – as you would know, a very small team, but they do a power of work.

**Michael GALEA:** They do.

**Peta McCAMMON:** But I think Argiri has got a bit more detail about that specific program for you.

**Argiri ALISANDRATOS:** Thank you, Secretary. And thank you, Mr Galea. Supporting Victoria's trans and gender-diverse communities is central to the work of the equality portfolio and is coordinated under *Pride in Our Future: Victoria's LGBTIQA+ Strategy 2022–23*. That is our primary overarching strategy that guides all the work in the portfolio. Discrimination and hatred towards LGBTIQA+ communities based on who they are is obviously simply not acceptable. We work in partnership with the Department of Health and the commissioner for LGBTIQA+ communities to engage with and provide programs to support the health and wellbeing needs of trans and gender-diverse Victorians.

The 2023–24 target for the BP3 performance measure for the number of people engaged through a trans and gender-diverse peer support program was 250 people. The outcome for this performance, as you have alluded to, was 461 people, exceeding the target by 135.2 per cent, which is fantastic. This marks the second consecutive year that the outcome has exceeded the target for this performance measure. We can attribute this result to the context of ongoing, sadly, and increasing vilification being experienced by Victoria's trans and gender-diverse communities. While we have made great progress, we know that stigma and discrimination continue to contribute to poorer health outcomes and wellbeing outcomes for LGBTIQA Victorians across the state. In addition, Victorian LGBTIQA+ events have been disrupted by extremist groups, including events delivered by local councils and libraries. Online transphobia is prevalent, with a recent survey finding nine in 10 participants had witnessed online anti-trans hate activity. These factors have obviously led to a significant surge in demand for support groups, including those funded by the Victorian government. In response to this surge in demand the Victorian government has provided investment to support the health and wellbeing of trans and gender-diverse communities. The trans and gender-diverse peer support program, delivered by Transgender Victoria, is just one of those investments in a suite of activities supported or delivered by the Victorian government.

In 2023–24, in addition to funding the peer support program, the department supported a further 11 projects with over \$300,000 that directly met the needs of Victorian trans and gender-diverse communities through the equality portfolio's competitive funding programs. On 9 August in 2023 the Minister for Equality, Minister Shing, hosted a community safety round table at the Victorian Pride Centre to meet with LGBTIQA+ sector stakeholders about the challenges being faced across the community.

A follow-up meeting event, the Pride in Our Future community safety summit, was held in July 2024 with a further 80 sector representatives to discuss community safety in the context of increasing bullying and vilification. Again, in March 2024, the equality portfolio in partnership with Victoria Police and the Department of Justice and Community Safety organised and ran the LGBTIQA+ crowded places safety seminar. These are all important elements of how we ensure inclusion and safety for the community. The seminar was designed to introduce community stakeholders and others, such as public library staff and local council workers, to safety and security considerations when hosting face-to-face or online events.

On 26 February 2024 we launched The Unsaid Says a Lot, which was a landmark Australian-first campaign in support of trans and gender-diverse communities. The campaign was co-designed, produced and created by trans and gender-diverse communities. The campaign focuses on combating non-verbal discrimination, showing how subtle cues and microaggressions contribute to the exclusion of LGBTIQA+ communities, especially trans and gender-diverse communities. Transgender Victoria reported an increase of 50 per cent in service inquiries as a result of the campaign.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you. Quite a power of work is being done, quite clearly.

**Argiri ALISANDRATOS:** Significant.

**Michael GALEA:** I only recently discovered that Victoria is actually the only state that has an equality minister.

**Argiri ALISANDRATOS:** Indeed.

**Michael GALEA:** It is quite surprising when you consider all the important work – all of those things that you mentioned, in fact, but in particular those community safety forums – in light of some particularly harmful narratives and attacks. It just underlines the importance of that and indeed of the work that the small but mighty

team in the department does. In a similar vein, the 2023–24 budget papers outline a pride in ageing initiative of \$4.5 million to support older members of the LGBTIQ+ community in feeling safe and secure and remaining comfortable to be who they are. Can you talk to me a little bit about this, please, in particular as it affects people in outer metropolitan and regional areas?

**Argiri ALISANDRATOS:** Thank you. Let me just get my question papers here.

**Peta McCAMMON:** I can make a start, if you like, Argiri.

**Argiri ALISANDRATOS:** Thank you, Secretary.

**Peta McCAMMON:** Pride in ageing is a pilot initiative that responds to the unique needs of older LGBTIQ+ Victorians by providing peer-designed, culturally safe and local programs to promote social inclusion and reduce isolation and loneliness. The program has been designed to align with the Victorian government's *Ageing Well in Victoria* action plan for 2022–26 and the 10-year LGBTIQ+ equality strategy *Pride in Our Future* for 2022–32. The program provides safe and accessible supports for older LGBTIQ+ Victorians to age well in place and retain their independence by continuing to live in their homes and local communities. The program will also drive capacity building with workforces in the aged care sector to improve accessibility and support for LGBTIQ+ Victorians in aged care settings. Research tells us that ageing in place and participating in communities provide physical and mental health benefits, including the prevention or delayed onset of many chronic and preventable illnesses and the adoption of health self-care behaviours.

Older LGBTIQ+ people are seven times more likely to live alone, which is a risk factor for isolation and loneliness. They are also less likely to own their own homes outright and more likely to be in informal or insecure housing. As they age LGBTIQ+ people may be reluctant to engage with support services because of prior negative experiences or feeling compelled to go back into the closet to access services. This is why this work is so important, as it supports older LGBTIQ+ Victorians to age in place with dignity and respect. Switchboard Victoria has been engaged as the lead partner agency in the delivery of the program. Switchboard is uniquely positioned to effectively deliver pride in ageing. They have extensive experience in delivering service and support programs for LGBTIQ+ older people, including delivering the Victorian government's strengthening seniors inclusion and the Commonwealth-funded Out and About program, supporting LGBTIQ+ older people for more than eight years. Older LGBTIQ+ Victorians have shown a strong interest in the program, with over 20 community engagement meetings with Switchboard being held across the state to inform the program's co-design. To ensure older LGBTIQ+ people living in Victorian regions are included in the co-design process, Switchboard has partnered with Rural Pride Australia.

An expert advisory committee has been convened to make sure the development of Pride in Ageing is peer-driven and heavily community-informed. Committee members were selected through an expression of interest and invitation process. Members were selected based on demonstrated ability to engage older LGBTIQ+ people in planning and consultation, experience working with a diverse range of LGBTIQ+ community members and community organisations to respond to the needs of older people, experience of effective partnerships and capacity to provide strategic policy advice on projects and monitor risk.

The committee is chaired by Brenda Appleton, who was also the first LGBTIQ+ ministerial taskforce community co-chair in 2015. The committee membership includes five leaders from LGBTIQ+ communities and is supported by the department and the office of the commissioner for LGBTIQ+ communities in ex officio roles. The committee provides advice and direction to the program steering committee made up of Switchboard and department representatives who meet monthly to ensure the program is as accessible and effective as possible.

The Pride in Ageing program supports older LGBTIQ+ Victorians via a statewide telephone and online visitors program alongside in-person supports provided by program coordinators in four locations across the state. In determining which areas of Victoria to pilot the program, Switchboard developed selection criteria which focused on assessing each region's demographics and strategic location, community capacity to engage with the project, organisational partnership opportunities and opportunities to expand LGBTIQ+ visibility and reach to meet assessed needs and gaps.

As I said, Switchboard also engaged Rural Pride Australia to ensure the program design and activity includes a strong regional and rural focus. Three coordinators will be assigned regional areas, and one will be assigned a

peri-urban area in recognition of the growing communities on the metro fringe. All staff will be supported by each location's own regional advisory committee, represented by local services and community members. The coordinators will be based in Gippsland, Wodonga, Warrnambool and Golden Plains shire, a peri-urban area.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you. So Golden Plains is a peri-urban area, is that right?

**Peta McCAMMON:** Yes.

**Michael GALEA:** It is great to see that right across the state there are indeed those support services. It really is important that they are across different parts, because just as with all other Victorians, LGBTIQ+ Victorians do live in all corners of the state, so that is really good to hear. Thank you, Secretary. And thank you, Mr Alisandratos, as well.

Secretary, one of the most important other functions of your department is child protection, and in the budget papers last year there was funding specifically provided for improved outcomes for children in residential care. I know there have been some therapeutic supports implemented through this budget. Can you please talk to me about what some of those therapeutic supports have been and what the outcomes have been?

**Peta McCAMMON:** Sure. I do not know whether Annette or Danny is best. But as I mentioned in my presentation, at the end of the 2023–24 period we are up to 75 per cent of residential care having the therapeutic model in place, and that will continue in the next financial year. But to give a better sense of that investment and the outcomes and what we mean when we talk about therapeutic – is that you, Annette?

**Annette LANCY:** Yes. Thanks, Mr Galea. As you would be aware, the majority of children in statutory care are in home-based care, but we have capacity to provide residential care for up to 500 children per year. They tend to be some of the most vulnerable young people in the state as residential care is our last preferred care option. We had in the 2023–24 budget that initiative that you referred to that will allow us to move to all residential care having a therapeutic element to it. As the Secretary said, that has been rolled out in two phases. The first phase started immediately, which provided for 75 per cent of the base four-bed residential care units in the state to have the therapeutic offering, and the remaining 25 per cent of the base four-beds will move next financial year, 2025–26. We have been operating those under some interim therapeutic residential care guidelines. Most particularly they requires that for each unit, the young people in that unit have access to a therapeutic specialist. So that is a qualified worker –

**Michael GALEA:** I would love to hear more, but the time is out. Thank you very much.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. We are going to go to the Deputy Chair.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Thank you. Thank you, Annette. I might pick you up, because I have a number questions myself in respect to residential care. Do you know how many children are in residential care at the moment? I know you said up to 500. Do you have a specific figure?

**Annette LANCY:** That is for funded placements, but my colleague Mr O'Kelly may be able to provide the usage information.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Thank you.

**Danny O'KELLY:** I will just get the exact figure.

**Peta McCAMMON:** Is it correct to say, Danny, we publish in our BP3 the total number of children in care and then we publish how many are in foster care and kinship care and residential care. So as at the end of 2023–24 – and this is a daily average number – it was 472.

**Nick McGOWAN:** A daily average calculated from the previous 12 months, or –

**Peta McCAMMON:** Yes.

**Nick McGOWAN:** financial year?

**Peta McCAMMON:** Our actual that we reported in terms of our daily average number of children in residential care placements is 472.

**Nick McGOWAN:** 472. And as of today, do we know?

**Danny O'KELLY:** 464 children are in resi care tonight.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Okay. Do you have any children who you cannot manage to get into any form of care and are required to stay with their biological or other carers?

**Danny O'KELLY:** Sorry?

**Nick McGOWAN:** Do you have any other children that you cannot find a placement for outside the home?

**Danny O'KELLY:** If children are required to live outside the home, then we need to find a placement for them to live. Our first option would be exploring kinship options and thinking about what we might be able to do to support kin so that a young person can stay with family. If that is not feasible, we will do everything we can to support home-based care options, so foster care supports, and if that is not possible, what we do is look at, across the range of residential care options and providers that we have got, how we can provide support that meets the specific needs of young people that might be presenting. And they are often complex, so there is a lot of work that goes into considerations around things like matching and making sure we have got the right staffing supports in place to look after people – the kids – appropriately. And there will be circumstances where we might put less children in a unit than its full normal capacity to make sure that the young person can be cared for appropriately for a period of time. So if they need to be in residential care, if we have worked our way through those other options, then we have to work with our partners in the sector to create capacity in the system for young people to be supported.

**Nick McGOWAN:** The targeted care packages – are they designed purely for those in residential care, or can they also apply to some children who are in the home?

**Annette LANCY:** The targeted care packages can be used to support a young person who has been in residential care to move back to a home-based care placement, and we use that to sustain the home-based care placement.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Do the parents get the money?

**Annette LANCY:** It is for children who are within the statutory care system, so typically it would be during the period of time in which that child or young person is unable to safely return home to live with their parents. So it is utilised generally as a flexible package. Sometimes a provider working with the family may utilise it; other times it is utilised to provide additional material elements and supports for the home. Mr O'Kelly might want to talk to some of the specifics, but we are relatively flexible in terms of how it is used for the best interests of each child to ensure that this placement that they are in can be sustained. It can be a range of both therapy and therapeutic supports, but it can also sometimes be more material elements required for the home.

**Danny O'KELLY:** They are an enabler, particularly for young people as they get towards leaving care age, to start to prepare young people for moving towards independent living, albeit supported through a TCP. So as young people are getting towards turning 18 and we are thinking about what we are going to do for them to continue so that they can leave care well and live a good life post care, we can use TCPs before they are 18 to start to think about what that plan looks like and what the housing options might look like, knowing that we can use the TCP to provide some support to wrap around them.

**Nick McGOWAN:** How do you verify whether the targeted care package funds are actually being spent in support of whatever aspects it is designed to do when the children will return to the home, if in fact they return to the home as opposed to some other form of care, be it kin care or community or whatever it is?

**Danny O'KELLY:** The TCP funding will go through funded organisations that we have service agreements and contracts with. We would be monitoring what was happening through our normal contract management and oversight processes. Also, particularly with TCPs, there will be an active care team and case management process happening around the young person, so if there were concerns that funds from a TCP were not being used in the way that was set out in the TCP plan, we would need to address that. So the oversight happens



through the contract work that we do, through the care teams and through working with the young person around making sure that the expenditure is meeting the needs that have been identified through their care plan.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Do you have a breakdown for us of how many TCPs are in place for children in res care and in home care?

**Annette LANCY:** I do not have that with me. We could take on notice if we are able to provide that.

**Nick McGOWAN:** That would be great. Is there some sort of audit process? I understand what you say about the community organisations who are overseeing and implementing this, but is there an audit process that the department has to ensure that these targeted support packages are actually working? How do you assess it, other than what the community organisations say to you?

**Danny O'KELLY:** We are monitoring, so care teams are monitoring the effectiveness of a TCP in supporting the young person. We also take feedback from young people, particularly young people as they are getting towards leaving care, about the effectiveness or not of the supports provided through a TCP. But there is oversight that is done by us around all of our contracted obligations. We are monitoring to see whether or not the expenditure is happening in accordance with what was in the plan, and that includes agencies needing to come back and provide it. It is fairly detailed information about what we signed up for in the TCP and what has been spent. It is a program where we do actively recoup funds if they have not been used, because we are monitoring the use of those TCPs closely. It is fairly specific expenditure. It is not that difficult for us to get it back from the agency – 'You said, with the young person, you were going to spend funds on these things.' They need to come back to us with a reconciliation of how those funds have been expended.

**Nick McGOWAN:** If you could also provide that in terms of breakdown obviously for foster and kin care as well, in terms of just the broad numbers, that would be great.

**Annette LANCY:** Yes.

**Nick McGOWAN:** In respect to residential care, do we know how many of those young people – it could be any form of involvement with the law in fact. For example, how many of them would be on bail?

**Danny O'KELLY:** Specifically on bail, we would have to come back to you. But at the moment in terms of residential care – and I am always conscious that these numbers are very dynamic; it could be different from today to tomorrow – in terms of co-clients with YJ, under the protocol, there are 15 young people who are active, but that could shift, who are in residential care. There are also kids we are working with in the child protection system who are with their parents or who are with kinship care or home-based care who are also interacting with the youth justice system.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Sorry, 15 in resi care who are interacting with the –

**Danny O'KELLY:** Who are dual clients – active youth justice clients.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Right. Yes.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Okay. So I have just been asked to clarify something here: are there any children who are on targeted care packages who have returned to their home but they have been returned there because there is no placement available to them in either res care, foster care, kin care et cetera?

**Danny O'KELLY:** If a young person returned to –

**Nick McGOWAN:** Any scenarios where a young person has been returned to their home with a targeted care package because there is no available res care, foster care, kin care and so on and so forth.

**Danny O'KELLY:** No, it would not be because of that. There might be circumstances where the assessment process and the core processes – we have got young people in residential care who are on reunification orders, and one of the things we –

**Nick McGOWAN:** So which orders?

**Danny O'KELLY:** So reunification orders, where what we are trying to do or what the court has determined is that our work needs to be focused on reunifying the young person with family.

**Nick McGOWAN:** It is a really good point. How many would you have on reunification orders?

**Danny O'KELLY:** I would have to – it is not a small number, but we would have to take that on notice.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Is it quite large? You can obviously provide that to us later, but is it a sizeable number?

**Danny O'KELLY:** There are a fair few in resi, but I would prefer to take that on notice so we could provide – and again, it is a dynamic figure; it moves around. But we were –

**Nick McGOWAN:** Presumably that does not change the level of protection you determine that child needs.

**Danny O'KELLY:** No.

**Nick McGOWAN:** It just makes your job more complex because you then have to return them to the home with additional safeguards.

**Peta McCAMMON:** It is not that we have to return them to the home, but you are right in that their safety is still paramount in terms of the child. But there are circumstances where – and we have got some programs with some intensive support to actually work to build parental confidence and capability with an ultimate aim to, provided it is safe, return the child.

**Annette LANCY:** So Mr McGowan, perhaps to assist, our legislative framework sets out a hierarchy of case plan goals that we all work to. So it is family preservation in the first instance – that is, allowing a child or young person to remain safely in the home – then family reunification, which is when the child or young person is away from the family home. We are working, as the Secretary said, to secure safety and allow that young person to be safely reunified back with their birth parents. If neither of those are possible, our legislative framework moves towards long-term care planning – moving towards a permanent care outcome outside the family unit. But we work in that hierarchy so that in all instances where possible we are working to preserve the family unit or reunify the child with their family as soon as possible.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Sure. Thank you for that. In respect of the kids and young people who are in res care again, do you administer guidelines to the organisations you work with in respect to how staff are expected to, I suppose, both interact and supervise children who are drug affected or taking drugs or known to have taken drugs? How do they understand what your expectations are in their management of those children?

**Danny O'KELLY:** So yes, there are – and the starting premise is effectively a sort of zero tolerance to substance use in the house. That is our starting point, and if I walk back from that, we do have young people who have significant vulnerability. They may well be grappling with issues of addiction and substance use, so what we ask staff to do is work with the young person in understanding in the first instance that they cannot do that in the house, that we are clear on that, and then we walk back in terms of all young people who live in residential care where we know there might be drug and alcohol issues at play, that they are referred to and engaging with a drug and alcohol provider.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Could you tell us how many were referred in the last reporting period?

**Danny O'KELLY:** I would have to take that on notice.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Please. Thank you.

**Danny O'KELLY:** And again, yes, it is a sort of dynamic process, but we will be able to provide –

**Nick McGOWAN:** Thank you, if you could provide that. Are we also able to see a copy of the guidelines that you provide?

**Danny O'KELLY:** Yes. They are publicly available, so that should be fine. What can be complex for staff in residential facilities is that there will be circumstances when young people might try and bring things into the house. It is a home, and it can be difficult sometimes for staff to even know that a young person is bringing

items into the house. And then even when they do, the process of what we ask staff to do is take those materials from the young person if it is safe to do so. We ask them to remove items and again try and engage the young person in actively grappling with the issues that are leading to substance use. It is hard for resi care workers to do that, but that is the frame that they operate in.

**Nick McGOWAN:** If you could just come back to us on those that are referred. But I suppose the relevant thing too is how many actually then complete their referral for some sort of rehabilitation.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Just to confirm, you have got children in residential care using drugs?

**Danny O'KELLY:** No, not in residential care. No, I do not think that is what I said. There are young people

**Bev McARTHUR:** Well, you said they bring things in.

**Danny O'KELLY:** What our policy framework says is when circumstances arise that a young person brings substances into the house, our expectation is that you do everything you can, safely, to remove those items from the young person.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Are they required to report that?

**Danny O'KELLY:** The removal?

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Yes. The question is how many kids are trying to use drugs in –

**Danny O'KELLY:** They would report that in their daily sort of worksheets and their client –

**Danny O'BRIEN:** That is what I am asking. Are you able to tell us, over the year, how many reports there were of children using drugs in resi care?

**Danny O'KELLY:** Of children using drugs in resi care?

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Or attempting to, whatever you want to define it as.

**Danny O'KELLY:** The removal of material, of contraband, from a young person would not necessarily constitute an incident report, but it would be captured in terms of the care team's involvement and work.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** That is what I am asking. Can you provide whatever data you have on that?

**Danny O'KELLY:** Yes, we can take that one on notice.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Thank you.

**Nick McGOWAN:** I notice there is quite a significant increase, which is a bit of a concern – I know it would be of concern to all of you – in terms of the numbers of reports. Do we have any [inaudible], Secretary, for what is occurring there in terms of child protection, obviously, reports?

**Peta McCAMMON:** Sorry. Reports into child protection?

**Nick McGOWAN:** Yes.

**Peta McCAMMON:** Yes, we saw an increase – I think it was 8.5 per cent – of reports coming into child protection.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Up to 139 or whatever it was, yes.

**Peta McCAMMON:** Yes. It is probably relevant too that we have seen increases in family violence as well; I think it is a fairly similar increase in numbers of family violence. We have not done specific work about exactly what we think is driving that. There is obviously always population-type growth. We get a lot of our reports coming through schools. We have been doing a lot of work with schools about should all those reports

be coming into child protection, are there other opportunities for them to actually be referred into family services, Orange Door. But I do not know whether, Annette, you want to add anything to that.

**Annette LANCY:** I think the Secretary is correct. It operates as a 24/7 service. There are obviously a range of professionals who are subject to mandatory reporting obligations, particularly teachers and other professionals, so as the Secretary said, a large proportion of reports come from those systems. But we take all reports. They are triaged and assessed by our intake teams, and we do find that a significant proportion of reports to child protection do not require statutory intervention, and those are then on-referred to the Orange Door or family services or other community-based supports that can provide support and assistance to the family.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Are you able to break these down in terms of how many of those cases are sexual exploitation, how many of these involve adult perpetrators, how many of these involve members of the public?

**Peta McCAMMON:** I do not know whether we –

**Annette LANCY:** We would not at the report stage, because what we do is make an assessment based on the information that is provided as to whether it meets the threshold for further investigation by the child protection service, and then the child protection service would engage with the family. They have a period of time to ascertain whether there has been harm or neglect occurring or at high risk of occurring, and then at that stage they would classify –

**Nick McGOWAN:** Sorry to interrupt you there; we are just running out of time. Of the 139,000, how many would reach the threshold then for further investigation?

**Annette LANCY:** Only around a third of reports, and that has been consistent for several years, Mr McGowan.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Would you mind coming back to me with the specific figures for the last several years, if that is possible, just as a comparator?

**Annette LANCY:** Absolutely. I think it is on our website as well. I think we report it, but we can –

**Nick McGOWAN:** Okay. Thank you. Do you have any idea how many are repeat reportings? That is, one teacher might report something today and then next week they are duty-bound to report. Do you have any way of actually assessing whether that is the same person – the same people, plural, children – because of multiple reporting essentially?

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr McGowan. Ms Kathage.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Thank you, Chair, Secretary and officials. Staying on the protection of children and particularly around children in residential care, the 2023–24 budget included funding for addressing child sexual exploitation. What is that funding going towards?

**Peta McCAMMON:** Mr O’Kelly, do you want to do this one? There is a range of initiatives, particularly in relation to our SEPLs, our sexual exploitation practice leads, that we now have growth in that we have one of those in all of our areas and we also have some extra capacity in our after-hours service and also our statewide. But the work that they are doing, which I think Annette is going to talk us through, is really about also building the whole capacity of the child protection workforce. Also, in the work that we do in relation to sexual exploitation it is really important to call out that this is criminal activity – that there are unfortunately predators out there who do prey on children, vulnerable children. The children who are in care are vulnerable. So it is also really important, the work that we do with Victoria Police in this regard, because as I said, it is criminal activity. But Annette has a lot more detail than I do about some of the work.

**Annette LANCY:** I am going to pass it to Danny, because it sits within our office of professional practice, given the criticality and the specialist expertise that is required. So perhaps Mr O’Kelly –

**Danny O’KELLY:** Thank you. Peta mentioned how concerned we are about the exploitation of children and the importance of the work, particularly given that the children who we are working with are some of the most vulnerable children in the community. And with that in mind, as a statutory provider responsible for the

wellbeing of children and young people, exploitation responses are core business for us, but it is fair to say that we can only do the work we need to do to minimise the occurrence of exploitation through working with other agencies. So we have got a very much whole-of-Victorian-government, multi-agency response to dealing with exploitation, from thinking about what it is that we do for young people who are targeted or victims right through to a really concerted effort to target people who exploit children, in a more effective way.

We work really closely with Victoria Police as well as our partner agencies to disrupt child sexual exploitation, and in that context we have had additional resources invested over the last few years that aim to improve the way we do that work. Most recently we have got new investment in the establishment of a dedicated child sexual exploitation team in the centre to really strengthen – we are not coming off a zero base. We have been doing good work in this space, but we now have a team being established to really drive our practice leadership and to really improve our intelligence gathering and our analysis so that we can focus on targeting network offenders and really get a collective focus on the people who are perpetrating and targeting the kids who we support. We will have this team fully in place by early in the new year, and it sits in our chief practitioner's team, in the operations part of DFFH. We have got practice leadership role analysts. We are really pleased about our investment in analysts, because –

**Nick McGOWAN:** That is the 19 of them?

**Danny O'KELLY:** No, this is additional to the 19; the 19 are a different resource. This is analysts who can help us do the work around understanding what we are seeing and target our work more effectively. We are looking forward to seeing what that leads to for us. It will also enhance our capability around making sure all of the stakeholders that have a role in this space are working together effectively.

Obviously, we work really closely with VicPol on this work, and we have got some really positive work happening around our IT capabilities, a consistency in our operating model to make sure no matter where you are across the state we are delivering our services in a consistent way and getting real clarity around the roles of the respective organisations on mitigating and reducing child sexual exploitation. We have scoped out our intelligence-sharing and response practices, and we have got a new, enhanced information technology solution in development that we have worked on with VicPol and really goes to other things at their end – the way that we present information to them – that will help target those people that are offending against the kids that we support.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** I really like the language that you use around it, which is locating the, I guess, accountability and responsibility for the actions with the perpetrators rather than with the children or the people that are caring for the children – that this is a choice that people are making to break the law – so it is a great to hear that you have got that relationship with VicPol to catch those people.

I would like to move on, if I could, Secretary, to talk about NDIS. There is a section in budget paper 5 I had not really noticed that much before, which is the administered items statement. Can you explain to us how much Victoria has contributed to the NDIS in 2023–24 – Victoria the state – to the broader program?

**Peta McCAMMON:** Yes. I am just trying to remind myself of the actual number because I remember what it was the first year that Victoria signed up, which was \$2.5 billion, but it is more than that now, isn't it, Argiri?

**Argiri ALISANDRATOS:** In total, yes. I will go through that. Thank you for the question. In terms of Victoria's contribution, it is \$3.1 billion annually that we provide to the national disability insurance scheme. Since 2013 that has been \$17.6 billion worth of investment that the Victorian government has contributed to the scheme in totality, so it is a significant –

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Since 20 when, sorry?

**Argiri ALISANDRATOS:** 2013. So it has been a pretty significant contribution of support that we have put in there. That has resulted in 177,000 Victorians who are now active participants in the scheme, and that is a significant number in terms of the quality and care that the scheme is being able to provide to those individuals who have disability across our state.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** The work that is taking place to reform the scheme and to build that disability ecosystem – how is Victoria contributing to that sort of nationwide process?

**Argiri ALISANDRATOS:** We have got significant work happening in that space, the Victorian contribution. I should say it is a significant reform environment that we are in. Back on 1 November 2024 disability ministers reaffirmed their commitment to the independent review of the national disability insurance scheme and the disability royal commission. They are two significant bodies of work that really inform what the disability landscape will look like into the future, and a key element of that reform is the development of foundational supports – an ecosystem, as you quite rightly say, that connects both the scheme and a number of other elements that are under consideration for development within the state jurisdictional environment. National cabinet back in 2023 agreed that the Commonwealth and states and territories would jointly design and fund the foundational supports, and this work is underway at the moment with our Commonwealth colleagues and with our state and territory colleagues as well to really design that foundational support system and the ecosystem that connects both the scheme and the foundational support elements that we have in place. We obviously continue to advocate quite strongly for the design of foundational supports to be underpinned by meaningful engagement with people with disability. We are always reminded that people with a disability have lived experience of the system that they utilise for support, and they are instructive in the way that we should construct that system going forward. I will just get a little bit more information for you as well.

We are building off a good base in terms of the disability environment within Victoria. The state has continued to invest quite heavily in disability supports. Even beyond the contribution that we make to the scheme, we have a range of investments totalling \$35.9 million over two years around strengthening Victoria's interface with the NDIS initiatives. As an example, the disability in children output programs included in this initiative talk to support for Victorians who do not meet NDIS Australian residency requirements. We make sure that people who do not meet those residency requirements and are not eligible for disability support through the scheme are provided with support by the state. Otherwise those people would not be receiving any support. There is \$2.7 million over two years to provide coordinated supports for Victorians with complex needs, targeting those with more complex needs and trying to ensure that they get the right wraparound support, and \$21.4 million over two years for children and family services to assist vulnerable families to establish necessary supports for family members and disability. That is about how we get early intervention support to those families that are struggling with the care of their children, particularly as they intersect with the child and family services system. So the state has invested quite heavily in providing those supports for those families, and that helps those families stay connected and stay together and ensures that we do not have deeper intrusion into the child protection and family services systems.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** It is a really important service. On early intervention but more generally, the packages under NDIS for early intervention learning before children start school, I guess we have got our Department of Education, but does your department speak into that process at all of the children who are picked up and supported by NDIS to be prepared for school or supported to go into schooling, or is that more directly between the Commonwealth and the Department of Education?

**Argiri ALISANDRATOS:** Yes, the Department of Education has – I should say, we are co-governors of the scheme, so the states and territories have a vested interest in working closely with the Commonwealth to ensure that we have got all the right elements of support for children and we have got early intervention pathways for those individual children. But in parallel to that the state invests in the education system to enhance the delivery of support through our education system for children across the state as well. So it is a joint approach between Commonwealth-delivered services and state-invested and delivered services as well.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** In terms of your department's expertise and I guess what has been put to me by schools around cultural stigma for some families to accept, identify and diagnose that their child has a disability or has an issue, is that the purview of the Department of Education, or is your department doing work to support broadening cultural understanding and acceptance of disability as a normal part of our society?

**Argiri ALISANDRATOS:** I think that goes to our whole-of-government effort in terms of our state disability plan, *Inclusive Victoria*. Many of our investments and many of our strategy elements in there are about destigmatising disability, ensuring that there are strong inclusion efforts across our state and ensuring that all departments and all government institutions are doing everything that they can to ensure that all their services, all their policies, are inclusive. So that mitigates that issue that you quite rightly call out about stigmatisation.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** That state disability plan – I can see there was funding in the 2023–24 budget for that. It has got information there about disability liaison officers.

**Argiri ALISANDRATOS:** Indeed.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Can you tell us about the difference between them and the other initiatives that are set out in the state disability plan?

**Argiri ALISANDRATOS:** Yes, certainly. There are lots of initiatives within the state disability plan. I have mentioned *Inclusive Victoria – 2022–26* is our four-year whole-of-government plan, launched back in March 2022, and it is our fourth state disability plan. The plan is a key way to focus targeted effort by Victorian government agencies and for us to be accountable for making all parts of the community inclusive and accessible to everyone. The plan also sets out actions that help the Victorian government meet its obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with a Disability. It also is our implementation plan for achieving outcomes under Australia's disability strategy, and the initiatives under the state disability plan are giving more people the chance to join community activities, access services and advocate for themselves as well.

It goes to your point about the disability liaison officers. These were originally formed out of the pandemic. They initially helped people to access health service advice and vaccines during the pandemic. They now assist people with disability and their families to navigate the health and disability service systems. Through the 2023–24 state budget, government invested an additional \$6.5 million over three years in this highly valued program. As this investment –

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Sorry, I do not mean to laugh, but I bet it is. I was talking to an NDIS provider last night and we were just commenting that there is nothing as simple as the love between a parent and their child with a disability, and nothing more complex than the system that sits around them and all the things they have to do. So I can imagine that this would be a very popular one.

**Argiri ALISANDRATOS:** Absolutely, yes. It has become not only popular but it has become fundamental to how people with a disability navigate the health system. As we know, health services can be complex and multifaceted, so navigating that system is part of what these disability liaison officers do. They have supported health services to change policies and procedures to improve health care for people with disability and provided training and disability awareness. An example of this is the Eastern Health DLO team, who partnered with Expression Australia to deliver mental health communication cards so that health service staff are better able to communicate with deaf and hard of hearing patients while they wait for an Auslan interpreter. Another good example is work done by the Northeast Health Wangaratta DLO team, in partnership with the Office of the Public Advocate, to deliver healthy discussions projects to health practitioners to improve communication and inform decision-making by people with a disability. These are all really important elements of how you navigate the health system and how you get the best outcomes from the health system, when you have got this sort of support that people with a disability are being delivered. So that is one element of what we are delivering through the state disability plan, but there are lots of other elements.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** You talked about disability liaison officers, another really important and needed service around advocacy, which I believe is funded – as advocacy programs continue to be funded – under the state disability plan. How is that rolling out and how does that interact with the other elements of the plan?

**Argiri ALISANDRATOS:** The disability advocacy program assists people with an increasingly complex range of issues and is a really highly valued support for people with a disability. The program provides representations for individuals, support and capacity building for self advocates and works with government and non-government bodies to affect long-term systemic change. The program's self advocacy stream supports people with a disability to represent themselves and provides training, mentoring and opportunities for self advocates to come together, represent their views and learn from each other. The program's individual activities adopt a one-on-one approach. Advocates work with people with disability, their families and carers to remedy specific instances where they have experienced discrimination, neglect or harm. This process can be transformative, giving the individual new skills and the confidence to call out future instances of unfair treatment.

The program's systemic advocacy stream, which is the third stream, works with governments and organisations to achieve long-term social change so that the collective rights and interests of people with disability are met through legislation, policies and practices. These changes can occur through highlighting particular examples of harm at a point in time, or through ongoing advocacy of our systemic issues that are impacting many people. Through these mutually supportive and connected activities, Victoria's disability advocacy program plays a critical role in addressing barriers to access and equity in NDIS-funded and mainstream services, reduced access to housing, employment and education, and infringements on the rights of people with disability. So increasing access to disability advocacy is a key measure for addressing violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation of people with a disability.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Does that program provide funding to DPOs – disabled people's organisations – in Victoria?

**Argiri ALISANDRATOS:** To advocacy providers across Victoria, that is right.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** That is great. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Ms Kathage. We are going to go to a very short break before resuming consideration of the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing at 3:15 pm. I declare this hearing adjourned.

The committee will now resume its consideration of the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing. We will go straight to Mr O'Brien.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Thank you, Chair. Mr O'Kelly, can I go back to the questions the Deputy Chair was asking before with respect to TCPs. Can parents get TCPs at all or not?

**Danny O'KELLY:** Only if it is part of a plan to get a young person back home, but it is unusual.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Right. I guess my question is – and we sort of touched on it: are there circumstances that have occurred where the department has identified that children or a child need to be removed from a household but you have simply got nowhere else to put them and they have had to go back or have had to stay in the household?

**Danny O'KELLY:** No.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Right. Is there any –

**Danny O'KELLY:** If we identified that a young person was not safe in the home, what we would do is seek to have the young person removed and we would go to court, and that is where decisions about where the young person needs to be would be made. We would present our view in terms of risk and safety and what needs to be in place. There may well be a circumstance where what we have been directed to do is to support the young person to go back home –

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Yes. I get that.

**Danny O'KELLY:** with supports in place.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Right. The question that I am really trying to get to the nub of is whether there are any circumstances where the decision has been made that the child has got to come out of that household, but there is simply no foster care available, no resi care available, no emergency accommodation and they have to go back there, so you provide a TCP for the family and put a carer in during the day –

**Danny O'KELLY:** I am not aware of a circumstance where that might happen, no. If we have made an assessment that we do not believe that a child is safe in the home, obviously there is a process involving the court, but it is our duty for us to find somewhere for that young person to be supported. It would not be a matter of 'There isn't anywhere to go, therefore we'll try and do something back in the house.' But there will be circumstances where our position is one –

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Where they should come out, but the court might say –



**Danny O'KELLY:** Yes, and the court might disagree.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** I get that.

**Danny O'KELLY:** What we might do is seek to have conditions placed on that arrangement – that might include that a parent must engage with a set of services or that there must be different types of supervision and oversight of what is happening in the home – and seek to get that in place through the court orders.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Yes. On that point that I am asking about, where the department makes a call that the child needs to be removed, has that risk assessment level been changed at all in recent years – lowered?

**Danny O'KELLY:** We are probably better at doing the risk assessment in terms of standardising a safer risk assessment, which means that there is relative consistency in terms of our decision-making process around when a child is not safe to be in the home. What is probably different is –

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Can I just confirm, though: the risk assessment level has not been lowered?

**Danny O'KELLY:** No.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Okay. Are there any circumstances where a child is going back to the family home, for want of a better term, and the parents are getting TCP to assist in that, whether they might be having a support worker in during the day or other assistance?

**Danny O'KELLY:** TCPs are for the children.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** I get that, but presumably it is not given to the children in any circumstances.

**Danny O'KELLY:** No, but to their support provider. What is more likely to happen –

**Danny O'BRIEN:** So it is very rare that TCP is provided to the parents?

**Danny O'KELLY:** If at all.

**Annette LANCY:** Not to self-administer.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Sorry?

**Annette LANCY:** There would not be a scenario where we would provide a targeted care package to parents directly for them to self-administer. They are all administered by a service provider in accordance with the guidelines for the program.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Okay. That is the nub of the question, so thank you.

All right. I will move on to family violence, if I can. Secretary, Orange Door – there are 54 Orange Doors, I understand, with 18 primary sites, 18 access points and 18 outposts. How many FTE are employed in the Orange Door at each site, by level, classification and in total?

**Peta McCAMMON:** I would be surprised if we have that with us. Some of the FTE in the Orange Door are our staff, and there are also other providers. But I will just check, Mel, whether you have that.

**Melanie HEENAN:** I cannot give you the delineation on the classifications, but I can say that there are 1200 staff.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** 1200?

**Melanie HEENAN:** 1200 staff in the Orange Door.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Is that to date?

**Melanie HEENAN:** That is right. And just to clarify, Mr O'Brien, they are largely made up of the 51 partner agencies that support the Orange Door, so providers that are providing services within the context of the Orange Door's work.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Yes. Could you provide, then, on notice what proportion are government employees and how many are from the partner agencies – also, as I said, by level and classification – if you have got it?

**Melanie HEENAN:** I can get you the number in terms of the number of VPS staff, so the Family Safety Victoria staff that are in the Orange Door, and yes, I think I can get you the classifications. I can certainly let you know that the hub managers, or the Orange Door managers, are all Family Safety Victoria staff at a VPS6 level.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Okay. If can you let us know these on notice, that would be great.

**Melanie HEENAN:** Definitely.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Thank you. Did budget constraints see any of the 54 Orange Door sites close last year?

**Melanie HEENAN:** There were no sites closed. No, not at all.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Was there any reduction in service at any point, as in not open for a short period of time or reduced service level?

**Melanie HEENAN:** No. There would only be a closure or a reduction in service for a small period of hours if there was an incident that was being managed, but certainly no reduction in hours. In fact there has been growth in Orange Door services.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** What about in terms of inability to staff a site? Have there been any closures in that respect?

**Melanie HEENAN:** I can definitely make that inquiry. I guess what you are talking about is the Orange Door primary sites. The 18 Orange Doors are quite substantial sites, so that would not be possible in terms of not being able to stand up a service. There are also the outposts, which are –

**Danny O'BRIEN:** I am actually asking for all 54, including the outposts and including the access points.

**Melanie HEENAN:** The access points, likewise, are walk-in access points, so they would not be closed or reduced in service unless there was a very particular critical incident. The outposts are a little bit different, possibly, because you have to make an appointment to go into an outpost. It is a little bit different in that sense; staff would be sourced for outposts. But again, there has been growth in the number of outposts, so I cannot imagine that would have resulted in a reduction of service.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Okay. On the whole, how many L17s were presented by Victoria Police to the Orange Door network for the reporting period? For the benefit of everyone else, an L17 I understand is the form the police fill in when they have been called to a domestic violence, family violence –

**Melanie HEENAN:** I can tell you the proportion, and I will just get your number as well. So the proportion of TOD referrals, so sources of referrals into the TOD, there are 9 per cent of child protection referrals and 52 per cent are L17s in terms of the referrals into the Orange Door.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** So 52 per cent are referrals to Orange Door?

**Melanie HEENAN:** L17s, correct.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Can you tell me the actual number of L17s?

**Melanie HEENAN:** I will get that number for you, definitely.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Are you able to also provide that broken down by the 54 sites?

**Melanie HEENAN:** I will definitely be able to break it down into the 18 key sites, so the actual support and safety hubs, and I will certainly make an inquiry into whether or not we can break it down even further.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Whatever level of detail you can provide that would be great.

**Melanie HEENAN:** Certainly, and I can give you now the figure in terms of L17s: what that 52 per cent is made up of is 98,816.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** 98,816?

**Melanie HEENAN:** Reports, L17 reports.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** In 2023–24?

**Melanie HEENAN:** Correct.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Is that 92,000 or 98,000, sorry?

**Melanie HEENAN:** 98,000.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** 98,000, thank you.

**Melanie HEENAN:** Because when we look at the total number of referrals into the Orange Door it is 206,000 a year.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Right, so that was 2023–24?

**Melanie HEENAN:** Correct.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Okay. What is the KPI time for triaging L17s?

**Melanie HEENAN:** Well, triaging all referrals and the assessment process for all referrals into the Orange Door, we do have a performance target for that, and we are under that target, certainly in terms of assessments. I think it is five days; I will just double-check my memory on that. We are only just under by 4 per cent, and I guess it is important to clarify there that for an assessment to be triaged and for us to meet that particular performance target we need to undertake a comprehensive MARAM risk assessment, so the multi-agency risk assessment and management framework. That can take time, so if we are actually doing a comprehensive MARAM, which can take quite considerable time, sometimes up to a couple of hours, and we are not able to engage or speak to that person within the five days and complete the comprehensive MARAM, then we fail to meet that particular target of five days.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Okay. So just to confirm, because again it is a little hard to hear you: five days is the KPI for responding to an L17?

**Melanie HEENAN:** I am just going to clarify that for you.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Yes, by all means. And what is the –

**Melanie HEENAN:** Seven days, apologies – it is seven days.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Seven days, righto. And what is your actual performance in 2023–24 in responding to that?

**Melanie HEENAN:** I will just find that for you.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** I guess I am getting at, is there a backlog on acting on them?

**Melanie HEENAN:** In terms of the total assessments undertaken, we certainly were well in excess of our target for that, which was 76 per cent – sorry, 176,012 total assessments undertaken when our target is 100,000. We were just under – so 76.5 per cent was the outcome for 2023–24 in terms of assessments being undertaken within the seven days, and the target is 80 per cent, so we were under by 3.5.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Okay. Target is 80 per cent within seven days? That is across the board, not just L17s?

**Melanie HEENAN:** Correct.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Right, but L17s as well?

**Melanie HEENAN:** All referrals into the Orange Door, pretty much.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Can you tell me then how many L17s were not handled in the required period? Is it simply mathematics of the 98,000 – just say 24 per cent?

**Melanie HEENAN:** Well, we are dealing with raw numbers there and percentages here. I can absolutely undertake to get that information for you.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** If you want to clarify that. And what is the longest completion of an L17 that you had last year, as in obviously one that did not meet, but –

**Melanie HEENAN:** I am sure we would be able to get that information for you. I guess the important thing to qualify around that, Mr O'Brien, is that there could be a number of reasons why a referral into the Orange Door might take quite some time before it can ultimately result in an allocation, and in fact what it might result in ultimately is the Orange Door being able to meet that client's needs within that time. The Orange Door is certainly the entry point into the system, but it is also able to offer brief intervention, so we are in a situation with the Orange Door where we can sometimes actually close out from the Orange Door; we do not need to refer on. But I understand the point you are raising, so I will see if we are able to provide that.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Thank you. That would be great. Maybe for the Secretary: DFFH is paying Jo Farmer Consulting half a million dollars for a second evaluation of the Orange Door, according to page 99 of the questionnaire. It is unclear as to whether that report will be released. Can you confirm that it will be released publicly?

**Peta McCAMMON:** I might ask whether you are aware of that one.

**Melanie HEENAN:** Yes, we are still certainly having a look at the extensive results that came back through that evaluation. So the intention would be to absolutely be able to release that and certainly make it available to partner agencies and others that really contributed their time and efforts into that report.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Do you know when that is going to happen? It says 'report pending approval for release'.

**Melanie HEENAN:** I cannot tell you exactly. No, I am sorry.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Okay. No worries. Of the total family violence budget, can you provide a breakdown of what is directed towards prevention and what is directed towards support services?

**Melanie HEENAN:** In output funding I think we can, but are you interested in a particular program?

**Danny O'BRIEN:** No, overall.

**Melanie HEENAN:** Okay. Let me find that. The output funding is – excuse me for a moment.

**Peta McCAMMON:** It is \$27 million.

**Melanie HEENAN:** Pardon?

**Peta McCAMMON:** I think it is \$27 million. So there is an output 'Primary prevention of family violence'; the actual was \$27 million. And then in terms of our 'Family violence service delivery' actual, it was \$721 million. They are the two BP3 outputs that we have.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** The question, though, is: what percentage is directed to prevention and what is directed to support? Do you have that information?

**Melanie HEENAN:** No, but we can calculate it. Someone should be able to calculate that.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** That would be great.

**Peta McCAMMON:** We will be able to calculate it for you in time.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** I will have to move on, so if you can provide that on notice, that would be fantastic.

**Melanie HEENAN:** Of course. Sure.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** And equally if there is a target that you are heading towards on that, if you can –

**Melanie HEENAN:** For prevention or for output?

**Danny O'BRIEN:** The proportion that is spent on prevention versus support services. I do not know if you do have a target or not, but if you do –

**Peta McCAMMON:** We do. That is published in the budget paper. So our target was \$30.1 million, our actual was \$27 million. Our target for service delivery was \$622.5 million, and our actual was \$721.3 million.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** No, what I am talking about is the proportion of funding that is spent on prevention versus the –

**Peta McCAMMON:** We can take that. Sure.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** All right. Can I just move on to disability for a second. Secretary, with the introduction of the Disability and Social Services Regulation Amendment Bill earlier this year, there is some confusion as to the future of the disability worker commission and the disability worker registration board. Is it still the intention of the department to merge these entities as the Bill states, or is it to keep them separate as the budget states?

**Peta McCAMMON:** I might ask Drew to come up in relation to that one.

**Drew WARNE-SMITH:** Mr O'Brien?

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Yes. The question is: is it the intention of the government still to merge those entities?

**Drew WARNE-SMITH:** It is the government's intent to streamline and make more efficient and easier to navigate the system of disability oversights in the state. As you will be aware, there was a Bill introduced earlier this year, prior to 1 July, to give effect to the first stage of the government's public commitment. That was to merge the disability services commissioner, not the VDWC. The disability services commissioner is a complaints function for state-funded services only. It comprises, I think, five or six FTE.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Okay. Can I just be really clear, because we had confusion in the last hearings on this as well: the Victorian Disability Worker Commission and the disability worker registration board, are they to be merged into the new social services regulator?

**Drew WARNE-SMITH:** That is government's announced position from the start of this year. However, the Bill that I was referring to, which was the first stage of that consolidation, government has said that given the extent of forecast change at a national level around the response to the NDIS review and the disability royal commission and also the design around a foundational supports system, given response from the sector, the government committed to taking more time to consult with the sector about that proposal. The Bill has not progressed at this stage, but at the same time the government has not moved away from its announced position earlier in the year.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** It has not what, sorry?

**Drew WARNE-SMITH:** It has not moved away from the announced commitment.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Okay. So we are still in a state of flux? We are still consulting with the sector and –

**Drew WARNE-SMITH:** We are at a point of – that is right, government is ensuring that it consults closely with the disability sector and also to ensure there is alignment with other reforms as they unfold at a national level. So its original timeframe obviously will not be met, because it is committed to taking more time.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** You said that is partly because of the inquiry into the NDIS?

**Drew WARNE-SMITH:** That is right.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Someone said before that is going to have impact on structures around the sector, so that is why it is on hold, basically?

**Drew WARNE-SMITH:** That is right. I think there was feedback from the sector given the amount of forecast change that certainly the sector rightly wants to ensure there is no loss of protections, which is also government's commitment. As a result of that the Bill has not progressed at this stage. It is subject to future government considerations.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Is that the same situation for the disability services commissioner? Is that position still –

**Drew WARNE-SMITH:** That is right.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** So that is still up in the air as well?

**Drew WARNE-SMITH:** That is right. Government announced that both of those two entities – because as we sit here there are three entities in Victoria that have responsibility for a form of regulation or complaints handling for people with disability. That is the new social service regulator, who regulates to standards for state-funded services. The disability services commissioner –

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Okay. I have got one more question – I think you have answered my question, thank you very much. Just on veterans, in the May hearing, Secretary, we had a discussion about the 39 per cent reduction in the veterans budget. The minister said that that was largely due to last year's implementation of the veterans card, the Victorian veterans card, but that cost about a million dollars. What I am trying to find out is what happened to the other \$4.3 million that was left over? Sorry, it is a \$5.4 million reduction in this year's budget. The minister said the services card cost a million. Were there staff reductions, were there other programs that were cut in the veterans sector for this year?

**Peta McCAMMON:** I do not have that detail in front of me, unless –

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Could I ask you to take it on notice?

**Peta McCAMMON:** Yes, we can come back to you on that.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Thank you very much. I am running out of time anyway. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** You have run out of time, Mr O'Brien.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** And I got my question on notice in, Chair. Just in time.

**The CHAIR:** And you got it in. I did not want to give you a ding-ding, 'You've got 5 seconds to go.' We have got Mr Tak.

**Meng Heang TAK:** Thank you, Chair. Secretary, I just want to go back to the Orange Door and to your presentation earlier in particular about the Orange Door network. I want to refer to the program outcomes on page 27 of questionnaire, number 4, the Orange Door. Secretary, can you step the committee through the government's investment into Orange Door's network?

**Peta McCAMMON:** Yes, thank you for the question. I have seen that Mel has come back to the table. I was asked about the government's investment in relation to the Orange Door.

**Melanie HEENAN:** Okay, sure. So there has been an investment in the first four years of the Orange Door – that was \$448 million that went to establishing and operating the Orange Door. In terms of 2023–24, \$226.1 million was invested in the Orange Door to operationalise all of the Orange Doors that we were talking about, so the 18 hubs, the outposts and the access points.

**Peta McCAMMON:** Sorry –

**Melanie HEENAN:** Was there a follow-up question? I could not hear.

**Peta McCAMMON:** It is difficult to hear back there.

**Meng Heang TAK:** I have not got one.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Yes, it certainly is. In terms of those rollouts, do we have a sense of the engagement in particular with multicultural communities? I know that is something which is a pretty critical element.

**Melanie HEENAN:** Yes, we do. I mean, certainly the Orange Door has become increasingly more visible I think across communities, which is a really happy circumstance. So the self-referrals into the Orange Door since it was established have grown to 27 – it is almost 28 – per cent. So I do know that there is a proportion, a good proportion in fact, of clients coming into the Orange Door where their known country of birth was a country of birth other than Australia, at 12 per cent. There are also service system navigators that we have within the Orange Door. Those service system navigators work with the local community, including the local multicultural communities, to just make sure that those services are aware of the Orange Door's service offering and sometimes can make warm referrals into the Orange Door. So the service system navigator is a really important role to be able to increase that engagement and understanding of what the Orange Door can offer to the community in response to family violence and also in response to child wellbeing concerns.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Are they at the main 18 sites, those service –

**Melanie HEENAN:** The service system navigators? Yes, indeed they are.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** And do we have an assessment of how much engagement they have had out into the community? Do we keep any metrics on that sort of activity?

**Melanie HEENAN:** I do not believe we do keep metrics in relation to it, but certainly their sole role and function is to be making those outreach, I guess, engagements with local community, particularly where the Orange Doors are new service infrastructure. So that role was really critical to be able to build an understanding of what that Orange Door offering was going to be. I mean, I think the growth in referrals that we have had is an indication of the local communities' trust I think in the Orange Door, and an ability to self-refer means that either those local community engagements and partnerships are really resulting in people then thinking about their option and coming in themselves or contacting, or those warm referrals are happening into the Orange Door from that local level, which is a really, really good indication for us.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Thank you.

**Melanie HEENAN:** Thank you.

**Meng Heang TAK:** Thank you. I will also talk about funding for Orange Door. How has that funding supported Victorians that are impacted by family violence?

**Melanie HEENAN:** That funding has been enormously important to operate the Orange Door. It was a brand new infrastructure that followed the Royal Commission into Family Violence's recommendations. It was a flagship recommendation to establish the Orange Door. It has meant, you know, 206,000 clients are coming through the Orange Door – that is adults affected by family violence, that is adults who use family violence, it is children who may be victims of family violence in their own right, or it may be children and young people that are coming into the Orange Door or coming in through via parents where there are wellbeing concerns. So in terms of it being a visible point into a system that can provide triage and assessment and where risk can be very carefully looked at through that important workforce – within the Orange Doors there are specialist workforces that are made up of specialist family violence services children's and family services, Aboriginal community controlled organisation workers – they make up Aboriginal response teams within the Orange Door – and also practice leads across the Orange Door. So that means that the services that clients are receiving from the Orange Door are highly specialised. It means their support needs can be assessed as quickly as possible and that referrals can be made out to other services if that is necessary.

**Meng Heang TAK:** Thank you. Before I go on to the next topic, I just want to ask about the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-based Violence. Can you tell us what that involves?

**Peta McCAMMON:** You would have seen a lot of hats – orange hats – today, I think. Oh, you brought yours with you.

**Melanie HEENAN:** I did bring mine with me, yes. It is a very important time of the year in recognising, and in fact internationally recognising, certainly within Australia and across Victoria, 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-based Violence. It is a series of events really that can raise awareness across the community in relation to family violence and sexual assault. It can engage the workforces that work very hard and very earnestly to be able to address those issues, so it is an opportunity to recognise and come together in solidarity against what are still unacceptably high rates of family violence and sexual assault across the community.

There are lots of different events that might be led by community organisations themselves. I know our Minister for Prevention of Family Violence is involved in an event next week. The relatively new Parliamentary Secretary for Men's Behaviour Change is also engaged in either attending or leading events. They are a very important series of days that celebrate, or recognise and commemorate, the very challenging circumstances under which family violence and sexual assault are still being faced across the community.

**Meng Heang TAK:** Thank you. I note that the parliamentary secretary actually participated in a walk earlier today.

**Melanie HEENAN:** Fantastic.

**Meng Heang TAK:** Thank you. Moving on, Secretary, to carers and volunteers – thank you very much – my question is in relation to food relief, and I refer to budget paper 3 on page 43. As we all know and are acutely aware at the moment, the current cost-of-living crisis is providing a real challenge for many individuals and families in my electorate. Make a Difference Dingley Village have also done an enormous job to access the food that they need to feed themselves and also their families. Secretary, could you please describe to the committee how the department has responded to the increased demand for food relief in Victoria and to local organisations such as Make a Difference?

**Peta McCAMMON:** Argiri recently presented, I think, to a committee. So I am happy for you to –

**Argiri ALISANDRATOS:** Yes. Thank you, Secretary. And thank you, Mr Tak. The department has a lead role in supporting people, families and communities across the state to access healthy, nutritious and culturally safe food. As the Secretary said, I was really pleased to present at the Legislative Council's Legal and Social Issues Committee in August to discuss the department's submission to its Inquiry into Food Security in Victoria, which comprehensively outlined our work in this space.

Our remit is to support Victorians, families and communities facing disadvantage and vulnerability to access food relief at a time when levels of food, as you said, are insecure and demand for food relief continues to grow. The department delivers this vital support by establishing and coordinating regional and community partnerships, providing advice to government and implementing government policy, funded programs and services. To be effective, obviously, we acknowledge and work to overcome the systemic barriers to accessing food relief that some communities face, including First Peoples, recently arrived migrants, refugees and people seeking asylum as well.

To deliver food relief when, where and how it is needed we are prioritising investment and engagement at the local level. In 2023–24 the department provided \$1.3 million to six regional food shares in Albury–Wodonga, Shepparton, Mildura, Bendigo, Warrnambool and Geelong and to the Regional Food Security Alliance. Funding boosted the organisational capacity and sustainability of these organisations, food relief infrastructure and supported leadership and collaboration right across the food relief sector. These are important elements for how we sustain the sector and how we make sure that they are able to mobilise and support people's needs. In 2023–24 the six food shares collectively sourced enough food for more than 6 million meals for people living in 26 local government areas across our state, distributing more than 3 million kilograms of food to Victorians in need.

The Regional Food Security Alliance enhances collaboration between food shares to share resources, manage large-scale food donations, purchase cost-effective bulk food and coordinate logistics across the organisations. In the last 12 months to June 2024 the Regional Food Security Alliance sourced and distributed more than 170,000 kilograms of food donations worth more than \$2.48 million. A further \$1.5 million has been provided to the six regional food shares and the Regional Food Security Alliance to continue their operations in 2024–25, and the department's work this year has expanded to deliver the new \$4.5 million community food relief program funded through the 2024–25 state budget as well.



Through the local grant stream the program will fund neighbourhood houses and community and volunteer-led organisations who are delivering proven and innovative food relief programs and supports on the ground. The Minister for Carers and Volunteers will announce the local grant recipients very soon. Through the coordination grants stream we are increasing the system capacity of partnering agencies to receive, store and distribute food on a large scale. Coordination grant recipients include Geelong Foodshare, SecondBite, OzHarvest and the Regional Food Security Alliance.

Our approach to addressing food insecurity continues to evolve in partnership with our community partners. We continue to look for ways to support Aboriginal self-determination through delivery of our work and to leverage the existing strengths and knowledge within communities about their own needs and the solutions that work in practice. I also want to acknowledge that there are a range of other parts of government playing an important role in reaching individuals and families in need, including the Department of Education and the Department of Health as well. We continue to work across government to guide a shared approach with a focus on building sustainability in the food relief sector, and we encourage even stronger partnerships across the sector, including between metropolitan and regional providers.

**Meng Heang TAK:** Thank you for your response. I can see how the program benefits metropolitan areas and how local communities have engaged in this one. I am interested in regional Victoria; you already mentioned it. Could you describe how the government is specifically supporting food relief to meet the needs of regional Victorians in general?

**Argiri ALISANDRATOS:** That is right. As I previously alluded to, a significant focus of the department's food relief work centres on regional Victoria. I already mentioned the operations of our six regional food shares, which are critical to the way we get food across to those communities, as well as the Regional Food Security Alliance. That has been supported through an investment of \$1.5 million in 2024–25 as well to continue that effort. This represents 15 per cent more funding than in the previous year, in 2023–24, in recognition of the increasing costs of delivery and demand for food relief.

Food shares supply food they source through rescue, donation and purchase to local community organisations that provide food relief to people in need on the ground. Funding provided to food shares through the department aims to build organisational capacity and sustainability, food relief infrastructure to ensure that they can store and distribute the food, and to support leadership and collaboration across the regional food relief sector as well. Through the investment in the Regional Food Security Alliance, we are also supporting a cooperative approach by food shares to food purchasing and logistics, large-scale food donations, fundraising activities and shared resources such as data collection, policy sharing and volunteering, engagement and support.

The department has also supported targeted infrastructure projects across regional Victoria to meet the additional challenges involved with moving food safely and to a high standard over long distances. As an example, a million dollars was provided through the department to Bendigo Foodshare to support the construction of a new community food hub. The multipurpose food hub will enhance food storage and distribution facilities and establish a social supermarket, community garden, food education hub and space for the Bendigo Community Farmers Market. The hub officially opened in September, and it provides a centralised location for the community to come together to address food security, share ideas and access locally grown produce.

The department was also pleased to partner with Foodbank Victoria in the construction of two foodbank community food centres, in Ballarat and Morwell, which are both now operational. Both centres are helping to address the current storage bottleneck in the regions and provide a critical link between Foodbank's supply of healthy food and those experiencing food security in regional Victoria. The new centres will have a strong food literacy focus, with a purpose-built training kitchen supporting food education for a variety of groups, including school-aged children, older Victorians and those who have not had a chance to learn about the benefits of healthy eating. Across the two sites Foodbank expects to distribute more than 850,000 kilograms of food annually.

The Secretary and I and a number of other members of the executive board had the pleasure of visiting the new Morwell facility earlier this year. It is an incredibly impressive facility and is already adding significant benefit to the local region and the local people there.

**Meng Heang TAK:** Thank you. I would like to go to the next topic, veterans. Secretary, on page 185 of budget paper 3 for 2023–24 you can see that the number of veterans employed annually in the Victorian public sector has exceeded expectations. What kind of work has underpinned that achievement?

**Peta McCAMMON:** Thank you for your question. The department is leading delivery of the public sector veteran employment strategy, which is supporting veterans to access stable, meaningful employment and providing the public sector with a wealth of expertise. The strategy has been in place since 2017, driven by a commitment to employ 250 veterans in the public sector between July 2017 and June 2021. The original target of 250 was quickly exceeded and in March 2019 was tripled to 750 by June 2021. The new target was achieved on time, and the government extended the strategy for a further four years, setting a new target to place a further 750 veterans into the public sector by 30 June 2025, taking the total number of veterans to be employed to 1500. The target was achieved by March 2024, more than a year ahead of schedule. The department is now working towards the new target of 1800 public sector roles to be filled by veterans between July 2017 and June 2025, announced by the Premier and Minister for Veterans in April this year, and I am pleased to report that we are well on track to meet this revised target.

These achievements are underpinned by the work of the veteran employment advocate Major General David McLachlan and the department's office for veterans. Key activities delivered under the strategy include veteran employment workshops, the veteran employment network and the veterans mentor program. The department delivered two veteran employment workshops in 2023–24. Around 140 veterans attended these workshops to learn about employment opportunities in the public sector and meet with department and agency hiring managers and veterans working in the public sector. Through these workshops we are empowering veterans to leverage their skills effectively in the job market.

We also know that sometimes veterans lack mentorship outside of the defence force or professional networks. The department oversees the veteran employment network and mentor program, which pairs current and former Australian Defence Force members with volunteer mentors to help with job applications and career advice. The department is grateful to veterans working across the public sector who volunteer their time in this way. The importance of the person-centric nature of this strategy cannot be overstated.

The work of the department is critical in building relationships across government and industry and with veterans. The veteran employment advocate and departmental representatives regularly attend defence and veteran events throughout Victoria to cultivate these relationships and to extend our networks to reach veterans who have not previously considered a public sector career. These efforts are ensuring strong outcomes continue to be achieved under the strategy.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** I think that it is quite extraordinary, to triple the target since last year and then beat the target again in the next year. Can you talk to some of the aspects that led to that initial real burst of activity that was so successful and has continued to provide a great platform for success from thereon in?

**Peta McCAMMON:** Yes. We know that veterans sometimes face unique –

**The CHAIR:** Apologies, Secretary. I am going to interrupt.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** We will come back to it.

**The CHAIR:** We will go straight to Mr Puglielli.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon. Just picking up on a conversation that was raised earlier – I do not think I heard the info, so I will ask the question anyway – during Homelessness Week earlier this year there were grants allocated I understand of between \$50,000 and \$100,000 to 14 food relief organisations. I understand, though, or I am told, that there has been little to no information about who was picked and what they received. Could you provide the committee with a breakdown of which organisations received those grants and how much they received each?

**Peta McCAMMON:** Do you have that?

**Simon NEWPORT:** Yes.

**Peta McCAMMON:** Yes, we do have that for you.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** That would be great.

**Simon NEWPORT:** I can provide that breakdown. I am assuming you are referring to the \$1.1 million, which was the commitment in the most recent budget.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** I believe that is right, yes.

**Simon NEWPORT:** Okay. I will read out the organisations and the dollars. Is that okay?

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Yes.

**Simon NEWPORT:** All right. They are in alphabetical order: the Australian Muslim Social Services Agency in Flemington, \$66,000; Emerald Hill Mission in the City of Port Phillip, \$66,000; Flemington People's Pantry in Flemington, \$66,000; Merri Outreach Support Service in Brunswick, again \$66,000; the Park Towers Community Pantry, which is with a Foodbank partner called the It's the Little Things Community, in South Melbourne, \$250,000; Reaching Out in the Inner West in Footscray and Williamstown, \$66,000; St Mary's House of Welcome in Fitzroy, \$66,000; Stonnington Community Assist in Prahran, \$66,000; St Vincent de Paul soup van in North Melbourne, \$66,000; the Community Grocer in Fitzroy and Carlton received \$250,000; and Uniting Harley's Meals in Prahran also got \$66,000.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you. Just to follow up, I understand Farnham Street neighbourhood house auspiced an application from Flemington People's Pantry for second round funding. But I understand it has been a few months now and Flemington People's Pantry still does not know how much they have received from that. When can they expect that information?

**Sherri BRUINHOUT:** Thank you for the question. Flemington People's Pantry is an amazing service run by Senior Pastor Hince and his team at the Essendon Baptist church, who are working really hard to pack boxes full of food and other essential items that are helping people who live in or around the Flemington community and public housing sites. Senior Pastor Hince received \$66,000 in September this year. My office has been in contact with him as recently as last week, and I am very happy to report they are doing a great job and that that money has been received. I would also note that that is a commitment of new money and a new announcement of \$1.1 million for 2024–25; it is not actually part of the 2023–24 budget. I am very happy to have more conversations about that with you at next year's PAEC, perhaps.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you. Just so I have heard correctly, there is not an additional funding tranche that is expected for the People's Pantry?

**Sherri BRUINHOUT:** No, the department wrote to Senior Pastor Hince in August of this year outlining a \$66,000 grant for the year of 2024–25, and that grant in its entirety was in their bank account in September of this year.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you. Just moving on to another matter, is the new Homes Victoria construction at 147–161 Elizabeth Street, Richmond, which is set to deliver affordable and social housing, planned to include any public housing?

**Simon NEWPORT:** You are referring to the Big Housing Build project that is due to complete in around about six or so months?

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** For Elizabeth Street, Richmond, yes.

**Simon NEWPORT:** That is part of the Big Housing Build, and much of the growth that has gone into the community housing sector is a result of the Big Housing Build. There has been no final decision, but generally speaking, as part of the Big Housing Build, properties end up being managed by the community housing sector. But I cannot give you a definitive answer yet, because the final procurement and decisions have not been made yet.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Okay. By what stage can we expect that to be definitive?

**Simon NEWPORT:** Well, if it is community housing, we would need to appoint someone, I would suspect, in the next three months. If it is going to be public, it will be in a similar timeframe, and that is to allow us

enough time to run the logistics of starting to move people in. But I also point out that that project is probably about five months ahead of schedule.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you. Looking at an overview across the state, are you able to provide the committee with a breakdown of how many public housing dwellings in total are currently vacant across the state and maybe disaggregate them by postcode, if you can?

**Simon NEWPORT:** Well, postcode –

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** You are welcome to take it on notice if need be.

**Peta McCAMMON:** We do have some detail around percentages, because I am just conscious that is probably a pretty dynamic situation in terms of vacancies. Do you have it there, Danny or Simon, what the percentage is?

**Simon NEWPORT:** I can provide vacant statistics, but I hope you forgive me for not having the postcode information.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** If you can take that aspect on notice, that would be really appreciated.

**Simon NEWPORT:** Of course.

**The CHAIR:** Actually, Mr Puglielli, I think Mr Newport has some further information that he wanted to give you. The point of the public inquiry is to ask questions, not just assume that everything will be taken on notice, or there would be no point of these inquiries. Mr Newport, do you have any further information you wish to provide? Perhaps it is broken down by LGA.

**Simon NEWPORT:** I certainly have statistics at the moment, and I will defer to my colleague Mr O’Kelly for any further information.

**Danny O’KELLY:** Certainly, and again not by LGA. At the end of the last financial year we had 1.8 per cent of the public housing stock in the re-letting process, so we were actively seeking to re-let those properties. It is lower than that previous year, and it has been trending in a really positive direction in terms of getting our public housing properties back on the –

**Simon NEWPORT:** I can answer, Danny, if that is okay. I have just turned the stat, if that is okay.

**Danny O’KELLY:** You found the piece I was looking for.

**Simon NEWPORT:** I do. I can give you updated figures to 30 September. As of 30 June we had 1157 vacant homes that were in various stages of re-letting and another 1494 properties which are being held for asset management purposes. In total that is 2651. That is 1092 properties less than the same time last year, so a significant reduction, and there has been a slight reduction in the last three months as well, particularly on the properties available for re-letting. We are trying to work the portfolio as hard as we can and get as many people housed as quickly as we can.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Have any of those been vacant for more than three months?

**Simon NEWPORT:** I do not have those statistics available. There will be particularly in the assets held for asset management. I will give you an example of where a property suffers significant damage, say, like a fire, there are a number of processes that we have to walk through before we can determine what we are going to do. As an example, if the property is older and has asbestos, that needs to be treated. We need to fence it, we need to board it off. We need to then conduct inspections and feasibilities to determine whether it needs to be demolished or repaired. If it is to be repaired, we would scope it et cetera. Then we would go through some form of budget allocation. So it really depends upon the nature of the property and the turnaround and the works required.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** For the numbers you have given, are you able to tell the committee what proportion of those are vacant due to maintenance issues?

**Simon NEWPORT:** The asset management ones – there would be a subset of those again, and some of those are held because we have got some longer term decisions. As an example, at the moment some of those numbers would also include the towers that we are relocating renters for as well. We can certainly provide a little bit more of a breakdown for you.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you. That is much appreciated. Just regarding arrangements of the housing tower relocations, I understand that Homes Victoria has promised public housing residents that they will not be paying higher rates of rent if they are relocated into community housing. How much is the department paying to community housing providers to cover the cost of that rent-matching commitment?

**Simon NEWPORT:** I would have to get back to you on notice, acknowledging that there are different arrangements for different properties. Just to explain that a little bit more fully, the properties administered by Community Housing Limited at Flemington are under a ground lease model, so that is a different commercial structure than the structure for Abbotsford Street, which a government build and community housing operating. That is, if you like, a bit simpler because we own it and the community housing provider is operating it for us under our management services agreement. The first one is obviously a very complex public–private partnership. I think we will be able to provide some details on that.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** And in seeking that out, if you are able to tell us on that rent-matching commitment how long that has been budgeted for into the future, that would be useful.

**Simon NEWPORT:** I can only go out the four years of the budget estimates at the moment. I can answer that question for you now. That commitment is ironclad and continues at least throughout the budgeted period. I think that is the best that I can answer that question for the time being.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Just following up, it would be great to know what Homes Victoria has budgeted annually to meet the rent-matching commitment for residents in tranches 1 and 2 of the redevelopment program.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Which year was that, sorry?

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Tranches 1 and 2.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Of which budget?

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** We are talking about the impacts of the housing statement that is from the 2023–24 budget. Anyway, I will continue.

I will move on to another matter. Community services have been told by the government the reason for high vacancy rates in Richmond estate is lack of demand for or interest in these properties. For the financial year 2023–24, how many housing offers were made for properties within the 139 Highett Street, Richmond, tower?

**Peta McCAMMON:** I would be surprised if we have that with us today. We can see what we can provide, yes.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you.

**Simon NEWPORT:** If it is okay, I would just provide an answer to say that we talked about vacancy turnaround rates, and that is directly related to the question. The department has improved significantly in terms of its vacancy turnaround rates, but there is a significant difference between stock within the towers – and I know some of the stock you referred to is not, but this particular one in Highett is. We are finding that the average vacancy turnaround time for stock in towers is about 60 days, whereas the vacancy turnaround time for pretty much everything else – and the walk-ups sit somewhere in between – is under our target for 28 days. So the towers absolutely skew the numbers to about 40. It is not uncommon for us to have multiple offers, and without trying to shock the committee too much, we have had an instance where we have had to make over 25 offers on some properties in the towers. You can imagine that takes time, and each one has to be given an opportunity to inspect those. We will see what we can do about providing that information, but it is a significant factor.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you. For the same period, it would also be good to know how many offers were rejected for those properties, just to follow on. That would be much appreciated.

**Simon NEWPORT:** Okay. In that instance, 24. But I will provide all of that detail.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you. Just looking at a different site for the same financial year, how many offers were made for properties within the remainder of the Richmond estate towers, inclusive of 106, 108, 110 and 112 Elizabeth Street?

**Simon NEWPORT:** We can see what we can collect for that information, yes.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** And again how many were rejected would be useful, if that is okay.

**Peta McCAMMON:** Yes.

**Simon NEWPORT:** That may take some time, but we will see what is available.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you. Looking at a different estate, community services in the area have been told by government that families are not accepting three-bedroom homes at Atherton Gardens estate due to the estate being undesirable for families. So for the financial year 2023–24, could you provide the committee with how many housing offers were made for three-bedroom properties within Atherton Gardens estate, comprising 95 Napier Street, 125 Napier Street, 90 Brunswick Street and 140 Brunswick Street, Fitzroy?

**Simon NEWPORT:** Mr O’Kelly, do you want to respond to that assertion about people objecting?

**Danny O’KELLY:** We will not have it. Broadly speaking, the towers are harder to fill in terms of the vacancies. Across the state in almost every other housing office we are re-letting properties within 28 days, so we are turning the stock over really quickly and getting people into homes. We are seeing in the high-rise estates a higher number of rejections. In part it is just where our applications and where our demand are indicating people are wanting to go. But what you have described is true in terms of it being harder to fill those vacancies in those high-rise estates. We are doing everything we can in terms of identifying people off the VHR and making offers, but it has been more difficult to fill the vacancies in the estates.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Just to follow on from that, if we could be told either today or in the future how many rejections for the properties I have listed have occurred, that would be useful.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** You cannot have it both ways. Either they are good enough or –

**The CHAIR:** Excuse me, Ms Kathage. Do you have a point of order?

**Lauren KATHAGE:** No, I do not have a point of order.

**The CHAIR:** I will remind you, Mr Puglielli, the point of the inquiry is to ask a question and enable our witnesses to respond.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** They can answer it today. I am not –

**The CHAIR:** But give them an opportunity. I think there is an assumption from you that whatever you ask is going to be taken on notice, and I can see that our witnesses today do actually want to provide some context and information around the question that you are asking. Let us give them the opportunity to do that.

Mr O’Kelly, do you have something that you wish to say in relation to whether you can provide that information on notice or you do not collect that information? I think that is what the committee needs to be clear on, because we will request that information from you over the next five days. Mr Newport has already said in relation to another question Mr Puglielli has asked that that is going to take a lot of time, and I am guessing not within the five days. It is important to have it on record why that is the case and why you are not collecting this information.

**Danny O’KELLY:** We have got a KPI around vacant properties that is 28 days, so we try to turn the properties around in that 28-day period. In order to track and monitor how we are doing against that KPI, we are keeping close records on every property that becomes vacant and then we seek to re-let. So we do keep detailed information on property location and time taken to re-let particular properties. It also might mean that we try and do some different things to encourage someone off the VHR to take up a property. We are actively

trying to fill those vacancies as quickly as we can. The pragmatic reality has been it has been harder to fill some properties than others, and that is reflected in the way our data looks at the moment.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you. Moving on, with reference to Homes Victoria's Abbotsford Street, North Melbourne, projects, are you able to tell the committee how many households in total were living at the former walk-ups at Abbotsford Street, North Melbourne, at the time of the announcement of the redevelopment?

**Simon NEWPORT:** I do not have that figure, acknowledging that Abbotsford Street has now become available for us to start bringing return renters back, and they will be the first to return back. I can also say that the feedback from the renters has been exceptionally positive, including people we are taking through from 33 Alfred Street, the Y tower in North Melbourne as well. We are finding quite a lot of enthusiasm from returning renters for Abbotsford Street. I would also point out – you mentioned large families earlier – we decided that as that was still under construction we would take a number of smaller units and turn those into larger units, effectively turning two bedrooms into four bedrooms or two bedrooms into three bedrooms to accommodate some of the larger families either returning or those coming from Alfred Street. I do not have that figure right now in terms of returning renters from that previous site, but we could provide that to you. But they have been extremely well received.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Have formal offers for return been made?

**Simon NEWPORT:** When people are shown through, my understanding is that is done on the day. The operator does that all on the same day. I would have to find out the statistics of that. We get a reasonably regular report, but my understanding is that they do that as people are shown through. They give people the opportunity, give them a rental agreement, ask them whether they would like to consider it. Some absolutely sign up straightaway, and some of course say, 'Look, I'd like to think about it.' Nobody is pressured. We are finding quite a few people are signing up on the day because of the quality of them; others are taking some time to consider.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** I appreciate that. Then, I suppose, if you are looking into that, noting how many residents have accepted the formal offer as opposed to how many have not, and for those that have not why they have not – if there is a reason provided, that would be appreciated.

**Simon NEWPORT:** I think we can probably answer the first part of that question, which would be the statistics. I am not sure we collect the data as to the reasons why. We certainly collect people's wishes at the time and then reconfirm whether they do intend to return, and when properties are available, we go to them first. I am not sure that we collate information for that.

**Sherri BRUINHOUT:** Would you like me to add some additional information, Mr Newport?

**Simon NEWPORT:** If you have got it, go for it.

**Sherri BRUINHOUT:** Thank you for the question. I can report that 57 returning households have viewed homes, with only five households remaining to view or decline the matched homes; 23 returning households have accepted, with 15 households having now moved in; and 34 have declined the offer. Tranche 1 relocating household viewings commenced last week with offers now underway. This is data as of 15 November. Thank you.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you. Much appreciated. With reference to the final report of the social housing regulation review, when does the department expect that that report will be made public?

**Peta McCAMMON:** I do not think we have a date that we can give you today.

**Simon NEWPORT:** I can check the papers.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Maybe I will ask: has the department advised the minister to release the report this year?

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr Puglielli. We are going straight to Mr Hilakari.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Thank you, Secretary and officials, for your attendance and answers this afternoon. I was just hoping to get to maybe the heart of the previous line of questions. Why is it that people do not want to accept public housing offers in public towers?

**Simon NEWPORT:** Do you mind if I just quickly read a piece of legal advice – if that is okay, Chair – just to confirm what I have been advised would be preferable for me to answer based on the fact that there is an ongoing court case. If you do not mind, could I read a little bit of this, please. For anything to do with the decision to redevelop explicitly the Flemington and North Melbourne towers and the factors which affected that decision, we have been advised that the case is currently on foot before the Supreme Court. I have given sworn evidence and may be required to give further evidence. I understand that there is a sub judice convention under which Parliament does not inquire into matters currently before the courts, but I am still able to answer questions related to all other aspects of the development. I should refrain from answering questions specifically about the reasons for Flemington and North Melbourne. So I can answer your question, but I just wanted to clarify –

**Mathew HILAKARI:** I am very happy not to ask a question about those places but in general.

**Peta McCAMMON:** Mr O’Kelly actually has responsibility for the workforce, our housing workforce, for all of the 44 towers. So in terms of the general question around what the experience is around people in relation to the towers, I think maybe, Danny, you might be better –

**Danny O’KELLY:** It is a myriad of reasons that people will offer. In terms of the pointy end of the VHR and people who are wanting to live closer to town, there are a lot of singles, and a lot of our towers are not single units. The amenity in the towers for some people is not considered, what they –

**Mathew HILAKARI:** And in plain language, what does that mean?

**Danny O’KELLY:** It can mean in high-density sorts of environments some of the conditions in the units are basic things – things that we are working on all the time around heating, cooling, security and all those sorts of things – that we have to work on constantly to make sure that people who live in the towers live a good life. But it is more challenging in the high-rise estates.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** If they were rebuilt to modern standards, would that be a reason that more people would say yes?

**Simon NEWPORT:** I can answer those questions. I just cannot answer specifically to –

**Mathew HILAKARI:** No, not related to those.

**Simon NEWPORT:** Some examples of amenity in particular – shared laundries is a big issue. No open private space, particularly for verandahs, is a significant issue. Disability access is probably the number one issue considering the average age of the residents of the towers. We are unable to get, in some instances, electric walkers or wheelchairs into elevators but certainly not into doors. We are unable to –

**Mathew HILAKARI:** So people cannot access their own home?

**Simon NEWPORT:** No, they cannot.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** That is a good reason to say no to accepting an offer.

**Simon NEWPORT:** It is the number one reason we believe why people are refusing – the lack of disability access, because they were designed in the 50s and built in the 60s.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Thank you. You have got to the nub of it all, which is that the number one reason is people cannot get into their own home.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Point of order. The member is –

**The CHAIR:** Excuse me, Mr McGowan. I have not called you. Mr McGowan, you have a point of order.



**Nick McGOWAN:** The member is verballing the executive. I would ask the member to desist and ask his question clearly and wait for the response.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Was that a point?

**The CHAIR:** Excuse me, Ms Kathage. Mr McGowan, there is no point of order, and I would remind you that raising frivolous points of order is a waste of everyone's time, including your own. Thank you, Mr Hilakari.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** It is good to see you are back, Mr McGowan. I would not have known you were there if you had not called a point of order.

I might move back to the Victorian veterans card now that we have got that issue on the record. I will take us to budget paper 3 of 2023–24, page 48. This is a much-loved card. I hope I am not verballing there.

**Nick McGOWAN:** I think you are again.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** I feel like, from the interactions I have had with the veterans community, it is a much-loved card. I am just hoping you could talk a little bit about what this card offers. Is it different to what other jurisdictions have?

**Peta McCAMMON:** Sure. We have many much-loved cards in the department, but the veterans cards is probably our newest one. I will make a start, and Argiri can help me with any additional questions.

The department were continuing in 2023–24 with the investment of \$36.6 million over the four years to establish the veterans card, and it was launched in July 2023, consistent with the government's election commitment. The veterans card both acknowledges veterans' service and provides practical financial relief as well as access to targeted employment services and supports.

This initiative recognises that the transition from service to civilian life can be difficult for some veterans. While responsibility for veterans' transition and welfare primarily lies with the Commonwealth government, the supports provided through the veterans card are complementary and recognise veterans as a key part of the Victorian community.

The benefits that are available to veterans through the card include a \$100 discount on registration and renewal fees for one light motor vehicle, free registration and renewal fees for one light trailer and one light caravan, free marine boating licences, an exemption from holding a fishing licence, free public transport on Anzac Day and Remembrance Day and access to veteran-related employment programs. These discounts encourage veterans to enjoy the outdoors, pursue their hobbies and build social connections, which is an important protective factor when it comes to supporting positive health and wellbeing.

The department has worked across government to implement the veterans card in the simplest way. For example, some of the veterans card benefits, such as the free marine licence, do not require any further action beyond signing up for the card. If asked by authorities to produce a marine licence, veterans simply produce their digital veterans card to verify the exemption.

To be eligible for the card an applicant must live in Victoria and must have served or be currently serving in the Australian Defence Force. This broad eligibility for the card ensures that we are recognising the service of all Victorian veterans and is unique in comparison to the repatriation cards offered by the Commonwealth government to some veterans.

Certain benefits like registration discounts are also transferable. For instance, if a family member or carer registers the vehicle used to support the veteran, they can access the registration discount. By offering discounts on a range of household costs and facilitating connections to tailored employment programs the veterans card helps alleviate financial burdens while also fostering community engagement, which is crucial for reducing isolation among veterans following their service.

In relation to how the card differs from other jurisdictions, I might ask Argiri to continue.

**Argiri ALISANDRATOS:** The veterans card is the first initiative of its kind right across the country. It represents a significant shift away from reliance on just the Commonwealth Department of Veterans' Affairs repatriation card system. The Department of Veterans' Affairs system uses an impairment assessment to determine eligibility for support, which can exclude many veterans who do not meet those specific impairment criteria. As has been mentioned earlier, in contrast, our veterans card here in Victoria acknowledges any category of service as a primary metric for entitlement, ensuring that all veterans regardless of their health status receive recognition of their service and access to all of those benefits that have been outlined. This inclusive approach not only broadens support but also reinforces the principle that all service is absolutely valued.

I am pleased to note that other states and territories have approached the department seeking operational information on the veterans card initiative to support their own policy and program development, which is great to see. So we are assisting where we can. Unlike some other states and territories, however, the veterans card here offers a wide range of benefits, which cover vehicle registration and public transport, as the Secretary has outlined, making it the most comprehensive program right across the nation. The Victorian initiative is fully digital, delivered through the Service Victoria app, which many Victorians are already accessing for other purposes – for example, to download their digital seniors card or digital drivers licence. The emphasis on employment support through dedicated programs is also more pronounced in Victoria compared to some other states and territories, which do not offer as extensive resources for job placement support.

The comprehensive and tailored nature of the veterans card, specifically designed to meet the needs of the Victorian veteran community, sets it apart, and we look forward to seeing its continued growth in years to come.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** I am going to come back to just a question on outreach to veterans around employment services, so I am just giving you the heads-up, but I will come to that in the second. It brings together so many parts of government, so we have digital cards for government services, fishing and boating licences paid for. The boat launching fees have been removed already by this government a couple of years back, so it is a great day in Werribee South of course for any veteran, so I invite them to get there. It is one of the great boat ramps in Victoria. I will bring you back to outreach to veterans on employment. Do we do any direct outreach as part of the veterans card to veterans?

**Argiri ALISANDRATOS:** In relation to the veterans card?

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Yes. We get the information from the veterans card that this person is a veteran. Do we then do some specific outreach to them to seek to engage them in employment activities?

**Argiri ALISANDRATOS:** Absolutely. We certainly seek to engage directly with them as we work through their application through our Service Vic environment, and in doing so we also take the opportunity to look at other opportunities that might be available for veterans. There is a strong commitment around how we make sure that we engage in the full range of programs that are on offer for our veteran community. We talked earlier about the employment support, the mentoring that goes with that – all of those elements are critical supports that we provide our veteran community.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Great. That is fantastic. Thank you. I might move on to the Koorie Youth Council partnerships. There was a big day yesterday in treaty being kicked off in Victoria, important for our young people in Victoria, whether Koori or not. I am just hoping you can talk to the Koorie Youth Council partnership that we have, and that is in reference to page 24 of the questionnaire.

**Peta McCAMMON:** I am happy to kick in. It was a great day yesterday – pretty hot, though. It was very hot. Thank you for the question and acknowledging the important work underway to support positive outcomes for First Nations young people, particularly through investment in the Koorie Youth Council. In 2023–24 the department continued to support First Nations young people to achieve their goals and to grow and remain strong in their cultural identity. This work was driven through the department's partnership with the Koorie Youth Council, the peak body representing First Nations young people in Victoria. The government invested \$600,000 over two years in the 2022–23 state budget to establish the Koorie Youth Council as a principal partner of the youth portfolio. This builds on the department's existing partnerships with other youth sector

peak bodies, the Youth Affairs Council Victoria and the Centre for Multicultural Youth. Funding to the Koorie Youth Council was extended for a further four years in the 2024–25 state budget.

The Koorie Youth Council ensures meaningful engagement with First Nations young people on the design and delivery of initiatives that affect them. Funding provided by the department in 2023–24 supported the employment of key staff within the Koorie Youth Council, which is critical as the organisation continues to expand and move towards legal independence. Funding also contributed to the cost of establishing and delivering key events for First Nations young people across the state, including regional place-based forums known as Koorie Youth Blackouts. It supported the delivery of activities for First Nations young people such as youth mental health first aid, as well as professional training and development, and covered costs such as travel and accommodation for young people in regional and rural areas in order to reduce barriers to participation. I know all my colleagues at the table greatly value our productive relationship with the Koorie Youth Council and look forward to this continuing in 2024–25.

In addition to the core funding to support the Koorie Youth Council's operation, the department continues to partner with the council to deliver the Marram Nganyin Aboriginal youth mentoring program. This was established in 2016 and has been highlighted as a highly impactful and positive model for enhancing First Nations young people, including by the Commission for Children and Young People. The initiative takes a strength-based and Aboriginal community-led approach to build connection to culture and community, life skills and wellbeing, as well as providing training and employment pathways.

Five Aboriginal organisations are each receiving grants of up \$335,000 over three years. For example, Winda-Mara Aboriginal Corporation in Glenelg and Southern Grampians shires is supporting young people aged 12 to 25 with a three-year mentoring program which aims to connect them to culture, build leadership skills and support their future goals. As another example, Weenthunga Health Network in the City of Yarra will support young First Nations women with careers in health and wellbeing through a mentoring program specifically designed with and for young women. Local Aboriginal organisations receive support from the Koorie Youth Council to run these mentoring programs. The model reflects that connection to culture and is a powerful protective factor for First Nations young people.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** That sounds like a terrific program. It has been running for a while now. I look forward to seeing, if that is not already happening, some of those young people become mentors themselves. I know that is a really important pathway.

**Peta McCAMMON:** Absolutely.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** I do want to take us to Le Mana Pasifika, which is particularly important for the community that I represent, and just hear how that program has been going and being rolled out.

**Peta McCAMMON:** Sure. Are you able to do that one?

**Argiri ALISANDRATOS:** Yes.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** The minister and I were in Wyndham together with some of the leads and some of the people who were coordinating that activity. It was a real honour to be with them.

**Argiri ALISANDRATOS:** It is a fantastic initiative, Mr Hilakari. Just in relation to Le Mana Pasifika, the initiative continues to support more than 800 Pasifika young people each year across areas including mental health, educational engagement, cultural safety, family and community connection. The key outcomes achieved through Le Mana include facilitating and creating opportunities for Pasifika young people to participate in community, education, economic and civic society; increasing positive outcomes for Pasifika young people in health, wellbeing, education and community; supporting and building the skills, knowledge and capacity of service providers in working with Pasifika young people in culturally appropriate approaches; and strengthening coordination of local services, supporting and building the knowledge, skills and capacity of Pasifika communities to meaningfully engage and support their young people within the Australian context.

Support is provided through mentoring, leadership, networks and training, employment and education pathway workshops, a range of cultural activities, consultations with service providers and referrals to build protective factors to support youth engagement and prevent offending. That is a core element of the work that is delivered

through Le Mana. It also provides many different types of services to Pasifika young people, families and service providers which are intended to address the issues faced by young people from Pasifika backgrounds in Melbourne. These services are co-designed with young people and families, with focuses on emotional wellbeing, relationship building, education and employment and social, community and civic connection.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** That co-design work is just so important to having successful programs. We have heard that on this committee many times through our different inquiries.

I might take us to another wonderful card that Victoria is involved in, which is the Victorian seniors card – again, much loved, not just because I say it but because the facts bear that out in the budget reports. I think – and certainly correct me if I am wrong – 90 per cent of eligible seniors in Victoria already take up the program, which speaks to the love for that card. I am just hoping you can tell me about the program and some of the benefits that it delivers to our older Victorians.

**Peta McCAMMON:** There are over 1.4 million seniors card holders and seniors business discount card holders in the seniors card program, which, as you said, represents an uptake rate of 91.5 per cent of Victorians over the age of 60. The program encourages older Victorians to keep active and engaged in the community by providing discounts on a range of goods and services, including public transport concessions, to make it more affordable to get out and about.

To be eligible for a Victorian seniors card applicants must be 60 years and over, be a permanent resident of Australia residing in Victoria and be working less than 35 hours per week. Seniors can opt for a physical plastic card or a digital card via the Service Victoria app or both. The choice is up to them. They can apply for the card online or can pick up a hard-copy application at their local library.

A total of 91,699 seniors applied for a seniors card or a seniors business discount card in the 2023–24 financial year, with 98 per cent of the applications submitted online, which has resulted in data processing costs –

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Did you say 98 per cent online?

**Peta McCAMMON:** I know. I was just thinking that is very, very high – 98 per cent.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** That is extraordinary. That is amazing.

**Peta McCAMMON:** I was going to say something about my parents then, but I will not.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** There is the 2 per cent. Is that it?

**Peta McCAMMON:** No comment. Since the digital card was introduced in June 2023, over 80,000 seniors card members have opted for a digital Seniors Card or Seniors Business Discount Card. In terms of the benefits, seniors card holders receive a range of benefits that promote inclusion, access, community engagement and participation, and these include a 50 per cent discount on trams, trains and buses, including V/Line trains and coaches, when using a seniors Myki card; capped price travel anywhere in the state, including V/Line train trips; free weekend travel on public transport when travelling in any two consecutive zones; discounts at thousands of shops, services and businesses; discounted entry to Melbourne Museum, the Immigration Museum, Scienceworks and Zoos Victoria; exemption from a fishing licence in Victorian waters; and eight days of free public transport during the Victorian Seniors Festival across metropolitan and regional public transport services.

I would also say there are 3087 seniors card participating businesses offering seniors card discounts to make it more affordable to get out and about. In 2023–24 the program welcomed 200 new participating businesses. Among these discounts there are a range of discounts that help seniors manage cost-of-living pressures.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much, Secretary.

Secretary and department officials, that brings our session today to an end. Thank you very much for appearing before the committee today. The committee will follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing, and responses are required within five working days of the committee's request.

I am very conscious that today's discussion may have caused some viewers or listeners distress, and therefore I would like to list some of the support services that are available. If you are or someone you know is suffering from family violence, help is available for you. Please phone 1800RESPECT. Their helpline is 24/7 and can be reached on 1800 737 732. If it is unsafe for you to call, you can send a text message 24/7 to 0458 737 732. If you are in immediate danger, please call 000. In relation to the discussion around child safety, to report concerns relating to a child that are life threatening, please call Victoria Police on 000. To report concerns about the immediate safety of a child after hours, call the after-hours child protection emergency services on 13 12 78. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who need support, please call Yarning SafeNStrong on 1800 959 563. For our LGBTIQ+ community, you can give Rainbow Door a call on 1800 729 367 or send a text message to 0480 017 246. Alternatively, you can call QLife on 1800 184 527.

I would like to thank all secretaries and officers who have given evidence to the committee today and this week, Hansard and the secretariat. This brings to a conclusion the public hearings for consideration of Victoria's 2023–24 financial and performance outcomes.

I declare this hearing adjourned.

**Committee adjourned.**