

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Vaping and Tobacco Controls

Melbourne – Monday 15 July 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

Lee Miezis, Chief Executive Officer,

Jacque Stepanoff, Director, Policy and Regulation, and

Mark Bannister, Manager, Waste and Land Policy and Regulation, Environment Protection Authority Victoria.

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 Vaping and Tobacco Controls.

I advise that all evidence taken by the committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. However, any comments repeated outside of this hearing may not be protected by this privilege.

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 Lee – the names today are really testing me –

Lee MIEZIS: Miezis.

The CHAIR: Thank you – Chief Executive Officer; Jacque Stepanoff, Director, Policy and Regulation; and Mark Bannister, Manager, Waste and Land Policy and Regulation from the Environment Protection Authority. Thank you all so much for coming this afternoon. I invite you to make an opening statement or presentation of no more than 5 minutes, after which time committee members will just ask you some questions. I will hand over to you.

Lee MIEZIS: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, members. I would first like to acknowledge elders past and present of the Wurundjeri people, on whose country we gather today, and I pay my respects to how country has been protected and cared for by Aboriginal people for many tens of thousands of years and their continuing connection and aspirations for country.

Visual presentation.

Lee MIEZIS: As Victoria's independent environmental regulator, EPA's role is to protect the environment and human health from the impacts of pollution and waste, and it is important that the environmental impacts due to pollution from and mismanagement of vape and e-cigarette waste are considered when assessing their effects on the community.

Today I will principally focus on risks posed by batteries inside vapes. Vapes contain lithium ion batteries, which are combustible and are an ignition source when improperly handled, meaning that they can cause fires when they are not sorted, separated, handled or stored appropriately. They can cause explosions or fires at waste receivers and potentially injury and even death to workers. Our fire services tell us that they respond to at least one battery-related fire each week in Victoria. These fires present a significant health risk as well as financial costs to waste management facilities, to transportation companies and to communities.

Lithium ion batteries are embedded or are sealed inside vapes, which means that they are difficult to separate at end of life, and this really limits disposal options as you cannot dispose of them at traditional battery collection points, such as those that you see at supermarkets and other retailers. Instead consumers must remove the batteries from the devices, which is often easier said than done. Vapes often enter the waste stream undetected, are prone to improper disposal and are often put in general waste by consumers because they cannot easily find another disposal pathway, are not aware of the risks and consequences or simply do not know that their vapes contain a battery that is banned from general waste.

The environment protection legislation in Victoria protects human health and the environment from the harmful effects of lithium ion batteries once they become waste. The centrepiece of that legislation is the general environmental duty, or the GED, that means a person or a business accepting e-waste – so waste batteries of

any type – for collection, storage, handling, transport or reprocessing must take all reasonably practical actions to reduce risk to human health and the environment. However, while the GED applies to all Victorians, our legislation largely directs sanctions and enforcement to businesses, so this means when we are dealing with consumers or community members, EPA focuses our regulatory efforts on education and communication.

Vape waste is also controlled by Victoria's environment protection waste regulations, which set separation, storage and handling requirements for e-waste and batteries. And finally, vape waste is managed through our permissions framework, so waste transporters, waste receivers and processors that collect vapes require an EPA permission, such as a licence or a permit, and permission holders need to put in place fire-risk controls and a monitoring program. However, all of these regulatory provisions become less effective when businesses, including transporters and recyclers, are unaware that lithium ion batteries are in the waste that they are receiving and they are storing. So if hidden inside vapes, they pose a risk that can be very difficult to control, even for businesses that are trying to do the right thing.

Before I speak directly to actions EPA is taking to address risks from vapes, I want to give a short overview of our fire prevention program. So EPA conducted 350 inspections at recycling facilities between March 2023 and February 2024, issuing 17 infringement notices, 109 remedial notices, three official warnings and more than 475 pieces of compliance advice. So while battery fires continue to be a challenge, EPA is pleased that our fire prevention program has avoided a number of significant fires. EPA is also coordinating its efforts and is collaborating with other regulators and agencies both within Victoria and nationally to address the growing issue of vape waste. EPA has issued fines for vapes that have been littered, and we have increased our public education to raise awareness about how and where to dispose of e-waste, including used batteries. EPA is also leading the development of the first national guidelines to assist industry and local councils on the management of end-of-life lithium ion batteries. This will provide a powerful national standard for businesses and will enable a cross-jurisdictional approach to ensure good practices are shared amongst all operators.

This slide really demonstrates that there is a lot of work being done across the Victorian environment portfolio to address the risks to the environment and human health from vapes. While I will not go through all of these now, to save a bit of time, I am happy to go into further detail in your questions if you wish.

Finally, I thought I would just touch on some of the national directions or new directions on the national landscape. The Australian government has introduced restrictions on the import and sale of vapes, including a ban on sales of vapes outside pharmacies from 1 July 2024 and obviously the prohibition of sales to minors. This is expected to significantly decrease the number of vapes in waste. To respond to consumer concerns environment ministers have agreed to accelerate work to expand current battery product stewardship schemes, such as B-cycle, into a national, mandatory extended producer scheme that would include embedded batteries in devices like vapes. These changes are critical to the effectiveness of these stewardship schemes.

However, EPA considers vapes provided by pharmacies will continue to pose risks once they enter the waste stream, if consumers cannot easily separate the batteries embedded inside them. For that reason we think that improving manufacturing, import and labelling standards is a critical part of reducing lithium ion and vape-related waste and fire risks. Vapes should be designed to be easily dismantled and discharged and to avoid single use.

This type of product safety regulation is often led by the Australian government, and EPA Victoria has advocated for stronger product regulation as part of its participation in national consultation and we will continue to do so. Thank you, and I am happy to hand over to any questions.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. Mrs McArthur.

Bev McARTHUR: Thank you very much. Your proposition of recycling vapes depends on people buying them from a regulated market, correct?

Lee MIEZIS: What we are focused on is how they are disposed of, that is exactly right.

Bev McARTHUR: We are learning that a huge proportion of the vapes that are being used here in Victoria come from the illicit market, so there is no way you can regulate that – no way you are going to get the recycled products into your system of recycling, are you?

Lee MIEZIS: We are focused at two ends: firstly, through a product stewardship scheme. Vapes are –

Bev McARTHUR: But that is with legalised providers, right?

Lee MIEZIS: That is right, and the other half of it is consumers and how consumers then dispose of waste vapes and particularly the batteries inside them. The two are linked, and you are exactly right that illegally produced ones that do not meet any product standards are always going to create a higher risk. We will focus on both.

Bev McARTHUR: We learned from children today that they would not even perhaps put their vapes in a container provided by the school because somebody might see them doing it and they are not meant to be doing it, so they will not do it. They will just put it in a rubbish bin wherever they are. I am sure people buying illegal vapes do not seem to be interested in the environment.

Lee MIEZIS: No, that is right, and that is why tightening up is at the front end through product stewardship, as I have said, and obviously other parts of the system looking at illegal vapes. And then we, as the EPA, are focusing on consumers and appropriate and legal disposal of waste where it does occur.

Bev McARTHUR: But the law enforcement agencies told us they cannot even properly dispose of them; there is no system by which they can properly dispose of all the contraband goods that they acquire.

Lee MIEZIS: Yes. There are systems to dispose of battery waste. There is complexity with vapes, given the embedded nature of it, absolutely.

Bev McARTHUR: Yes, so how do you intend to overcome that?

Lee MIEZIS: What we are advocating for, as I was saying, is better product standards so that batteries are removed –

Bev McARTHUR: But the main products are coming in illegally. In China they are not going to comply with your better product standards, are they?

Lee MIEZIS: No, exactly, which is why we say it is really a national issue, and we are supporting the Australian government in how it deals with those things that are imported into the country. Of course that is not a matter for state governments. We have an advocacy role, absolutely, which we play strongly. We are leading work to manage risks to human health and the environment. But a lot of those levers that you have described do not actually sit within either EPA or in many cases within a state government.

Bev McARTHUR: So at the moment we have got vapes going into local government sites of waste disposal, correct?

Lee MIEZIS: Correct.

Bev McARTHUR: What threat does that pose to the environment?

Lee MIEZIS: Fires. As I have said, our fire services are seeing at least one fire caused by batteries – now, that is not necessarily directly related to vapes, but batteries and embedded batteries in particular are high risk to transporters of that waste, to facilities that are looking to recycle that waste and also to landfills, council and privately managed.

Bev McARTHUR: We have also heard that it is very difficult to pull a vape apart to get all the products out of it, yet there might be some valuable products in there, like the lithium battery or whatever. Where else in the world can you point to that they are able to pull it apart and recycle these products?

Lee MIEZIS: My understanding is that the issues that we are seeing here are global issues, but we do see other product types where they are created with a view to being able to be properly recycled when they are end of life. So there are examples in other product classes.

Bev McARTHUR: Whereabouts?

Lee MIEZIS: Many different product classes – so not vapes, sorry, I am talking about. You can construct a vape so that it can be easily dismantled, but it requires product standards up-front.

Bev McARTHUR: Once again we depend on the legal, regulated market, probably big tobacco, who might well comply with all these standards. But the vast majority of these products are being sold and produced illegally with no standards whatsoever. So you are not going to hit the mark at all, are you?

Lee MIEZIS: That is why in my view and in our view it is not just one set of actions that need to be undertaken. Absolutely, product stewardship and proper standards will make it easier to reduce risks at the end of life. We continue to focus right across the supply chain, though.

Bev McARTHUR: But you cannot have any oversight over the supply chain when these products are not being produced within a regulated supply chain, are they? They are being produced illegally offshore, imported illegally, sold illegally, with no standards whatsoever, so they are not interested in some sort of product regulation or standards.

Lee MIEZIS: A mandated standard means that you cannot import those products, but I take your point.

Bev McARTHUR: But we cannot import them now. We cannot import them now, but we are. There are truckloads of these things coming in every day. The authorities can maybe find one in 10. They are flooding the market, and there are no standards at all attached to them. So you can have all the product standards in the world, but the criminal element are producing or are selling here a totally unregulated product that has no standards of production.

Jacque STEPANOFF: Can I chime in? Thank you for raising the concerns about, as you described, flooding of these devices and illegal devices and the dangerous batteries embedded in them. I think the point that is helpful to raise is that we do have models, including in Victoria, perhaps at a more modest scale, of where devices with these batteries embedded can be safely recycled and processed. I learned recently that when you talk about product stewardship – which I had always thought meant the beginning of the chain; it is about the manufacturers – product stewardship also includes providing adequate disposal pathways and better disposal pathways. So it is EPA Victoria's view that any national product stewardship scheme should include better disposal pathways, including drawing on the examples that we have – again, I agree, modestly – provided here in Victoria. So I do think we have a model for how we can safely provide waste vapes into a recycling pathway, whether they are illegally obtained or not, and we hope that that model can be expanded through the national scheme that has been announced.

Bev McARTHUR: So you will be busy encouraging the consumer buying an illegal product to dispose of it legally?

Jacque STEPANOFF: I think the short answer to that is yes. We would not distinguish. I do not think it would be for EPA or any government agency to pick and choose which consumers we educate. Our view is that all consumers need the opportunity to be able to dispose of their waste safely and legally.

Bev McARTHUR: Should you run a better advertising program about the environmental effects of these products? Maybe all those people concerned about the environment might reconsider their purchases.

Lee MIEZIS: We do quite a number of campaigns around battery waste in particular. We have not done anything targeted specifically on vapes, but more broadly around battery waste we have, and it is an effective way for us to educate the consumer.

Bev McARTHUR: I will hand over to my colleague.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mrs McArthur. Mr Galea.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Chair. Thanks very much for coming to join us today. Just to start with, what proportion of vapes would you estimate are properly disposed of in Victoria?

Jacque STEPANOFF: It is hard to say, because we do not have data on those that are not properly disposed of. At this stage one of the problems we have, as in fact the other member raised, is the flooding of

illegal vapes into our waste supply chain. It is safe to say, though, based on the fire statistics that we have, that it is not enough.

Michael GALEA: And just on that with the fire statistics, can you give some sort of illustration of what we are talking about in the change over the last few years with the fires that we are seeing in the waste management process compared to, say, five years ago, or any other timeframe that you have got data for?

Jacque STEPANOFF: I have brought data with me for current fires. I have not brought data with me for a time series of fires.

Michael GALEA: Current data would be fantastic.

Jacque STEPANOFF: I think as Lee began with earlier in his speaking notes, he noted that we are looking at fire services reporting up to one fire a week.

Lee MIEZIS: About one a week, yes.

Jacque STEPANOFF: And some weeks reporting up to six. I think the Australian Council of Recycling submission, which was provided to the committee, talked about a thousand fires in the last year. It is quite extraordinary.

Michael GALEA: And I know that is covering all batteries and all other reasons for fires, right?

Jacque STEPANOFF: Yes, that is right.

Michael GALEA: As far as you can tell, if you can tell, what proportion of those fire incidents would you say are attributable to vapes?

Jacque STEPANOFF: We do not have that.

Lee MIEZIS: We do not have that information. I think that is part of the challenge. I mean, the most significant fire that we know of that has been confirmed as being caused by e-cigarettes was one in Canberra on 26 December 2022, known because of the impact it had and the damage. The rebuilding of the facility that burned down cost over \$50 million, and then there was a flow-on impact to waste collection. Now, there are probably many others, but that is one that we have been able to very clearly say was caused by an e-cigarette. With others it becomes difficult. The nature of these fires and the explosive effect of these fires – actually working out which battery or what the product was that caused them is very difficult.

Jacque STEPANOFF: And indeed many of these fires may not be in the waste stage of life as well. Some battery fires are triggered, as you would know, by consumers within their homes. We hear about scooters and those kinds of things. So it can be hard to slice this data, but I guess our perspective is there is no need to slice the data to know that we have a problem.

Michael GALEA: Yes. Especially when it does occur in that waste management process, I would imagine the air pollution outcomes from that would be quite horrendous as well. Is that fair, or is it variable?

Jacque STEPANOFF: Yes, it is fair to say that any fire leads to pollution – right, Lee? It leads to air pollution. It can have particular impacts on our waterways as well.

Michael GALEA: Particularly if it is burning anything that could be in rubbish – plastics and all sorts of other things.

Lee MIEZIS: That is exactly right.

Michael GALEA: We are talking a lot today about the regulation of tobacco vendors in particular, and also we have spoken briefly about the role that pharmacies will play with regard to vaping specifically. In terms of the waste processes – I guess more for cigarettes, vapes, the whole system – do you believe that industry has a role to play in actually subsidising some of these waste disposal efforts, whether it be for vapes or for cigarettes? Do you think that the people selling these products should be required to in some way contribute towards the cost of disposal?

Lee MIEZIS: Certainly I would say manufacturers, absolutely, in terms of both product design but also, as Jacquie was talking about before, having and supporting proper disposal pathways, and that goes to retailers too. We need to be enabling as best we can lawful and proper disposal of these waste products, and that cost should be, in my view, largely borne by the manufacturers and sellers of those products.

Michael GALEA: And that goes to what you were talking about with stewardship as well, that holistic process.

Lee MIEZIS: Absolutely.

Jacquie STEPANOFF: Yes. The question of where the investment comes from is a key question for those who are designing the stewardship scheme to consider, but it is certainly EPA's view that it would be impossible to do it without industry investment.

Michael GALEA: Thank you.

Bev McARTHUR: Sorry, just to continue on that, so the manufacturers and retailers, you are suggesting, maybe pick up the bill for the disposal of it?

Lee MIEZIS: For the products they make.

Bev McARTHUR: For the products they make, but the whole recycling or disposal of the product will also include illegal products, right? So if there are some waste deposits –

Michael GALEA: That is what the regulations are seeking to change. That is why I asked it in that context.

Bev McARTHUR: Yes. So if there is some depository for vapes, for example, where the cost of that is met by the manufacturers or the retailers, won't they also be therefore bearing the cost of the illegal product?

Lee MIEZIS: Yes. Free riders in the system, if you like. And that is where other tools need to be used, as you have identified, to really stamp out those illegal markets, otherwise, exactly, you will see a small number of those who want to do the right thing carrying the burden of those that do not.

Bev McARTHUR: Hardly fair.

Michael GALEA: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Galea. Mr Puglielli.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon. If I have a vape that is used up and I want to dispose of it, where would I take it?

Jacquie STEPANOFF: In Victoria if you have a vape and the battery is embedded in it – and I will ask my colleague Mark to tell me what that acronym stands for.

Mark BANNISTER: Oh, NTCRS. There are various product stewardship schemes that already exist for e-waste. In Victoria e-waste has been banned from landfill for some years, I think five years now, or more. Basically Sustainability Victoria and Recycling Victoria have set up a network of collection centres where you can take e-waste, but these generally belong to council transfer stations and other types of facilities.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. And one of those centres would be where I would take the used vape product. Even if it is an embedded battery, that is where it would go?

Mark BANNISTER: Yes.

Jacquie STEPANOFF: Many of the centres have options that have both loose batteries and also embedded devices.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. And how many centres like that are there in Victoria?

Mark BANNISTER: SV, so Sustainability Victoria, say that no-one is more than half an hour from a facility.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. And that is a consistent standard across the state?

Mark BANNISTER: Yes, of course.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Wow. Okay.

Bev McARTHUR: Out in the country too?

Mark BANNISTER: Yes, apparently. This is Sustainability Victoria's message.

Mathew HILAKARI: Good opportunity for a tour, I think.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Yes, it sounds like a tour is on the cards.

Jacque STEPANOFF: I want to make a clarification there. SV says that we are half an hour from an e-waste depot. Not all those e-waste depots may also accept embedded batteries in devices.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Do we have an overview as to what proportion do accept the embedded batteries?

Jacque STEPANOFF: No, I do not.

Lee MIEZIS: I think we would have to take that on notice.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: That would be very much appreciated if you can. And do you think there is a broad amount of public literacy in terms of people knowing where they can take their vape products, embedded battery or no? Do people know where they can take it?

Lee MIEZIS: I would say – and this is an opinion – that many people probably would not even realise there is an embedded battery within a vape, which is why we see them disposed of in general waste. I think, to Mrs McArthur's comment before, how we can continue to educate people around batteries and the types of products that have batteries is going to be critical to whatever the scheme is going forward.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. And is the EPA undertaking that work? Like, that is an issue you have identified, and you are going to be issuing those communications.

Lee MIEZIS: Yes. We have been doing broad work on embedded batteries. We are doing work that Mark is leading nationally on safe disposal, working with councils and working with waste transporters. There is a lot of work going on to raise that general awareness about proper disposal of these products.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. And do you have an overview as to what proportion of vaping products are disposed of in the correct way out of the overall product that comes into the state?

Bev McARTHUR: Illegal and legal.

Lee MIEZIS: No, would be the short answer. Getting a sense of the total, we would need to know how much is coming into the state overall.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: And we do not have access to that?

Lee MIEZIS: No. I think, as has been stated by Mrs McArthur, there is a large, large illegal –

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. To get even a vague sense of the proportion – is that something that can be provided on notice or is that beyond the scope?

Jacque STEPANOFF: We are very happy to look into what we can provide you with on notice. If we are not able to cover off the illegal component of it, we will let you know, but we are happy to provide you with any information we can collect about the proportion of vapes that are disposed of lawfully, if that is the question.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Yes, I just imagine it could be a performance measure that would be quite useful in coming years –

Jacque STEPANOFF: Yes, understood.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: to measure how these campaigns and communications are going. In terms of the idea of the bins at schools that we heard about earlier today, is that something that the EPA would support as a potential approach?

Jacque STEPANOFF: I think the EPA would support expansion of lawful disposal pathways. I think it is really a matter for schools and education as to what they feel comfortable to have on their premises, as long as the disposal pathways are safe and well supported. I would point out they do need to be safe and well managed and operating within lawful permissions.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay.

Jacque STEPANOFF: Can I come back to a question you asked me which I did not have the answer to?

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Sure. Go for it.

Jacque STEPANOFF: You were asking about education campaigns. There was a slide we had up earlier, and we did not want to talk too long so we did not go into detail, but it does talk about some of those education campaigns. So you are welcome to have a look at it later. There is one that is really impressive, which is Small Acts, Big Impact, which I know has been important. It was done by Sustainability Victoria. EPA has supported that and shared it through our networks as well, but we would encourage more of that kind of education.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. Thank you. In terms of the changes to design of the products that you mentioned earlier in terms of the regulated market, is it your view that any of the products that are sold in the country should be detachable so there is not that embedded battery issue that you are seeing?

Lee MIEZIS: Yes.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Is that a standard you would want to have set, that that is across the board, what would be applied?

Lee MIEZIS: Yes. Single use is an issue; it just creates more waste. But, yes, you are exactly right – you need to be able to safely remove the battery so that it can be recycled, and then other parts of the vape itself can be recycled. That is what we would be advocating for.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. And in terms of the overall waste you are seeing – I mean, we have focused on the e-waste side here, but cigarette butts, I understand, you also considered in your submission. You have identified that they are a significant litter problem, contributing to environmental pollution and fire hazards. I understand you have taken efforts to address this in some form. Maybe, firstly, in terms of proportion here, is that the greater proportion of the waste you are seeing, from cigarette butts, or is it the e-waste?

Lee MIEZIS: Yes. So EPA's role in relation to enforcing litter provisions under the Environment Protection Regulations is really focused on particularly cigarettes, and cigarette butts from moving vehicles is a large part of where we focus. With general litter enforcement, the responsibility is with local government. To give you a sense of scale, in the 2022–23 financial year about 60 per cent of all EPA litter fines related to cigarette butts – it was about 4600 – so it is a significant part of what we do now.

Bev McARTHUR: Does everybody pay the fine?

Lee MIEZIS: That is a different issue – no. We have collections through Fines Victoria.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: And what proportion of that figure – that would come from a total, I imagine, that you have just quoted, for the cigarette butts. How about for vape products?

Lee MIEZIS: Yes. We do not particularly –

Aiv PUGLIELLI: It just would be good to compare, I think.

Lee MIEZIS: Yes. No, we do not have specific data on vapes. We do for cigarette butts because they are classified as dangerous litter, which falls within our remit, because they are lit.

Jacque STEPANOFF: I can add to that, Lee.

Lee MIEZIS: Yes.

Jacque STEPANOFF: We did check our litter records to see if we had issued fines for litter of vapes. We have issued a small number – like, single digits – of fines for littering of vapes out of cars. Just to be clear, EPA’s litter regulations are quite narrow; they are focused on litter from moving vehicles and in a couple of other contexts. We do not have the broad litter powers that councils have. But just to let you know, there have been a small number of infringements issued where we have seen and had evidence of a vape being thrown out of a car.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Puglielli.

Bev McARTHUR: Can I just butt in, Chair? Just to clarify, that half-an-hour site, EV disposal site – half an hour from where? You mentioned that an EV, you know –

Jacque STEPANOFF: E-waste.

Bev McARTHUR: E-waste; sorry. E-waste disposal site –

Jacque STEPANOFF: Yes. I think maybe we will come back to you –

Bev McARTHUR: Half an hour from what?

Jacque STEPANOFF: I think we will come back to you on the details, but we can certainly find the announcement that Sustainability Victoria have on their website and provide it to the committee.

Bev McARTHUR: What do you think it is about? What does it refer to?

Mark BANNISTER: It was to do with the e-waste ban that was implemented and making sure that population centres were supported across the state. So to the degree – I cannot tell you if it is individual houses or population centres, but I think we will provide –

Mathew HILAKARI: You might provide the locations plus also those locations that accept vapes as well.

Mark BANNISTER: Vapes, yes.

Mathew HILAKARI: That would be really great if you could provide that.

Lee MIEZIS: We will take that on notice.

Jacque STEPANOFF: Thank you.

Mathew HILAKARI: That would help, Mrs McArthur.

Bev McARTHUR: Yes. I would like to know across Victoria where these disposal sites are and if they are half an hour away from anybody.

Mathew HILAKARI: Mrs McArthur would be really keen to understand where they are close to Geelong and her electorate office so she can make sure they get down there. I might go to my questions now, if that is all right.

Bev McARTHUR: I want to know how close it is to the rural towns, Mr Hilakari.

Mathew HILAKARI: Thank you, Mrs McArthur.

Bev McARTHUR: Actually everywhere outside the tram tracks of Melbourne would be quite helpful.

The CHAIR: We understand your question. You are just wanting to test that sense of availability.

Bev McARTHUR: Yes, availability – I would be very keen to know where all of these sites are.

The CHAIR: Okay. Mr Hilakari.

Mathew HILAKARI: Now that we have got some clarity around vapes and their sales, is that going to assist with engaging manufacturers to have those non-embedded batteries, and has that discussion started with other states and the Commonwealth?

Lee MIEZIS: Yes. There are certainly discussions happening at two levels. At the product stewardship level, as I was mentioning before, environment ministers have really asked for a more regulated product stewardship scheme in relation to batteries, so that work is underway. Mark, you might want to talk a bit about the work that you were leading, which is not necessarily about products but about management of that waste consistently, and again at a national level.

Mark BANNISTER: Yes. All the states and territories are concerned about, I guess, the growth in lithium ion batteries in general, not just in vapes but in all devices. At the moment there is very little information. We do have some guidance, but it is very basic, on how to manage batteries as waste. We do foresee with the energy transition and the popularity of electric vehicles and so on that it is just going to increase, so we are looking at guidance.

Mathew HILAKARI: Could you just speak a little bit to the variety of lithium ion batteries and what sort of products and the scope of products they are in presently?

Mark BANNISTER: Yes. It is everything from toothbrushes, your headphones if they are AirPods and so on – that small – through to phones, larger devices such as scooters and then you are looking up to EVs and then renewable energy storage devices, so getting up to the big scale. They have really taken off.

Mathew HILAKARI: This is a challenge that we have got to address –

Mark BANNISTER: Yes, it is across the board.

Mathew HILAKARI: regardless of the situation with vapes.

Mark BANNISTER: Yes.

Lee MIEZIS: Yes, that is right. If you think about it, lithium ion batteries are embedded batteries in everything from pacemakers through to kids shoes with those lights. You know, they are getting into all kinds of products and creating real challenges, particularly for waste companies or recycling companies. These things are getting into waste streams where they should not be, partly because people just do not know that there are batteries in these products.

Mathew HILAKARI: When we think of the wide scope of all of those lithium ion batteries, it may be a suggestion that those people who manufacture them should be paying for the recycling of them. It is not actually as narrow in scope as vapes versus illegal vapes; it is actually a huge industry.

Lee MIEZIS: That is right.

Mathew HILAKARI: Great. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Hilakari. Thank you so much for taking the time to appear before us this evening. The committee will follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing, and responses will be required within five working days of the committee's request.

I would like to thank everyone who has given evidence to the committee today, as well as Hansard, the committee secretariat and parliamentary attendants. I would also like to thank the hospitality, security and cleaning staff who have looked after all of us here today. I declare this hearing adjourned.

Committee adjourned.