

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Budget estimates 2020–21 (Neville)

Melbourne—Wednesday, 16 December 2020

MEMBERS

Ms Lizzie Blandthorn—Chair

Mr Richard Riordan—Deputy Chair

Mr Sam Hibbins

Mr David Limbrick

Mr Gary Maas

Mr Danny O’Brien

Ms Pauline Richards

Mr Tim Richardson

Ms Nina Taylor

Ms Bridget Vallence

WITNESSES

Ms Lisa Neville, MP, Minister for Police and Emergency Services,

Ms Rebecca Falkingham, Secretary,

Mr Andrew Crisp, Emergency Management Commissioner, and

Ms Jenni Rigby, Acting Deputy Secretary, Emergency Management, Department of Justice and Community Safety; and

Mr Lee Miezes, Chief Executive Officer, Bushfire Recovery Victoria.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Minister Neville. We are joined now by Commissioner Crisp. Thank you very much. We appreciate you all appearing before us today.

Again we invite you, Minister, to make a 5-minute presentation, this time in relation to the emergency services portfolio, and that will be followed by questions from the committee. Thank you.

Visual presentation.

Ms NEVILLE: Thanks, Chair. I suppose one of the big things—other than the biggest thing, which was the bushfires at this time last year, or not long after this, and then into January—is that we have gone through significant fire services reform. As a result, as members will be aware, we have changed legislation; we have gone through a process of establishing a career-only service, which is Fire Rescue Victoria, and re-establishing the CFA as a volunteer-only organisation. That was obviously a substantial piece of work that sort of stopped during bushfires but continued either side of that. And on 1 July a new fire service was established, staff were transferred as required and staff were seconded as required.

Importantly, at the same time, on 2 July the presumptive rights scheme commenced, and that was backdated to when we committed to it in 2016. So it was backdated to then. I may get an opportunity to talk a bit about how many applications we have had in relation to that. In terms of that, we have established that, we have the outcomes frameworks that have been published and we have got our public awareness campaign in relation to the new service, but of course at the moment we now have the campaign in relation to the upcoming bushfire season. We have got our FRV Strategic Advisory Committee. We have done the fire services reform implementation plan that was tabled in Parliament. We have a long-term secondment agreement between the two agencies, service level agreements, various MOUs in place, the Fire District Review Panel. I have also announced, or the cabinet have appointed, a fire services implementation monitor—he was endorsed by the Governor yesterday—the Honourable Professor Niall Blair, who is a former minister in the New South Wales government.

In terms of this particular budget, there are again significant investments in terms of broader emergency services capability. All up, we have got \$231 million to deliver fire services reform. That includes training and personal protective equipment for volunteers, the replacement of 15 fire stations, a new fire station at Clyde and the replacement of 50 firefighting appliances—so significant investment in relation to CFA particularly but also investment in essential information technology for FRV and for ESTA as well. There is money to bolster our bushfire response and recovery. There is money for the state emergency service's head office, which needs some significant repairs. We have, for the first time ever, significantly increased the State Control Centre capabilities.

What we have learned is, particularly when you have got multi emergencies running at the time and given how much we rely on a surge capacity from across government, this will give us a better operating model, with an additional 46 people going into the State Control Centre with the right skills across a whole lot of areas to provide that base functioning that the state's emergency centre needs. That is the first time we will have seen that.

There is money for ESTA. There is money for Life Saving Victoria. I announced some this week in terms of additional lifesavers over the summer, jet skis, additional helicopter and doubling the drone unit that Life

Saving Victoria operate, which is going to be so essential given what we are seeing around drowning rates as well. I could keep going, and then I am going to run out of time, as I normally do.

I just wanted to touch on the bushfires that we all experienced. Given the year we have had, for some it might seem a long time ago—for those communities, not so long ago, and they are still living through it. This slide gives you a sense of the impact that it had: five people's lives were lost; 1.5 million hectares; 2963 grassfires last summer; 545 forest fires—so really a significant impact that that bushfire bushfires had. But there is also assurance given. We have Bushfire Recovery Victoria, and Lee is here from that. Their work has gone on throughout the COVID period with those communities. CRCs have been established with the communities. The money that has gone out the door—I think all up it is about \$450 million that we have allocated. Most of the programs are then done jointly with the commonwealth, so there is more money than that. We have got our short-term modular housing out, so that has continued throughout COVID.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. Deputy Chair, Mr Richard Riordan.

Mr RIORDAN: Thanks, Chair. Welcome back, Minister. First question: I refer to budget paper 4, page 191, which deals with Fiskville. On 4 June last year you confirmed before Parliament that the firefighters' presumptive right to compensation will be separate to any entitlements firefighters may have under a Fiskville redress scheme. The government is currently examining the establishment of a redress scheme in response to a recommendation of the 2014 parliamentary inquiry. Minister, is that examination of the Fiskville redress scheme still continuing?

Ms NEVILLE: Yes, it is.

Mr RIORDAN: And when will that be complete?

Ms NEVILLE: Work is going on now about models. I am not sure when we will get it complete, but I am hoping that early next year I will have something that I can take forward as a policy setting to government.

Mr RIORDAN: So, Minister, given that time is very much of the essence—and I am sure you understand that, with the nature of the illnesses afflicting those people—and your government gave-in principle support for this some four years ago, how do you justify it taking so long and still going into next year before you have even got something to present to government? Is this a high priority for you?

Ms NEVILLE: It is a high priority—so are the bushfires, so are presumptive rights. It is a high priority. We have done a number of payments to people as a result of issues that arose out of Fiskville. I mean, I do find it incredibly ironic given how you fought any—and you still fight PFAS, seriously—

Mr RIORDAN: Minister, you are burying PFAS in a community in regional Victoria—

Ms NEVILLE: You buried this in government. You buried this in government. You let it continue—

Mr RIORDAN: so I do not think your position on PFAS—

The CHAIR: Deputy Chair!

Mr RIORDAN: is particularly high and mighty at the moment—

The CHAIR: Deputy Chair, could you allow the minister the opportunity to speak.

Mr RIORDAN: You are happy to dump it in one of your safe seats. It is outrageous.

The CHAIR: Deputy Chair!

Mr RIORDAN: Minister, moving on, I refer to budget paper 3, page 295. In his inquiry into the 2019–20 Victorian fire season the inspector-general for emergency management found that volunteers provide an essential surge capacity. Minister, what impact will your government's failure to meet volunteer targets and your reclassification of operational volunteers to support roles have on Victoria during our surge capacity?

Ms NEVILLE: Firstly, you may not support the fact that volunteers need to be properly trained before they are operational, but I certainly support the chief fire officer, and these are decisions that have been made by the

chief fire officer of the CFA. It was initially Steve Warrington, and the new CFA chief backs this in—that unless you have completed the training, your life is at risk—

Mr RIORDAN: So for people way out on farms in rural and regional Victoria, are you providing the training they need?

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, could you please allow the minister the opportunity to answer your question?

Mr RIORDAN: Well, she is getting high and mighty—

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, could you please—

Mr RIORDAN: My electorate is totally volunteer based. I have a great interest in my volunteers being supported and trained.

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, I am sure you have a great interest in volunteer training so I am sure you would like to hear the minister's answer to your question if you have a great interest in the issue. Thank you. Minister.

Ms NEVILLE: We are providing additional training and in fact have funded additional training, and one of the benefits of splitting the agency—because one of the things you would have heard, I am sure, from volunteers, as I have over decades, is that the focus has been too much on career firefighting training—is this is an opportunity to refocus the CFA. There have been some issues over COVID, because the CFA made some judgements about how people could undertake their training and how they could not. But let us just be really clear. There has been some shift. Overall there are more volunteers in the CFA today than there were last year. Operationally a number did not complete their training. I absolutely support the fact they cannot be operational unless they are fully trained—their lives are at risk otherwise—

Mr RIORDAN: But what is that number? How down is it?

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan!

Ms NEVILLE: Ultimately that was about 4000 that have shifted to non-operational support roles. Many of them are training and may get there before summer—if not, by the next one. But we have never used the full operational capacity of our volunteers. We have got 30 000 operational volunteers at the moment in the CFA—

Mr RIORDAN: Minister, that is a bit of a—

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan!

Ms NEVILLE: We had significant interest after the bushfires—about 8600. I think 1400 of those are going through a training process, so there continues to be interest from volunteers in joining the CFA, but we have enough operational volunteers well and truly. I think the most we have ever used is 17 000 in any bushfire, and that is at its worst.

Mr RIORDAN: Yes, but the other volunteers are not staying at home doing nothing, Minister. Last question—with 21 seconds—

Ms NEVILLE: Who said they were? Who said they were?

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan—

Ms NEVILLE: Overall we have got more volunteers.

Mr RIORDAN: Well, you said you have not used them, but they are there. They still need them.

Ms NEVILLE: We have got more volunteers who can support them doing that.

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, you cannot put propositions without the answer.

Mr RIORDAN: Minister, last question: Mount Gellibrand fire tower—you have said they can use it when the wind is not blowing.

Ms NEVILLE: Well, I did not say that, sorry. The CFA does the engineering. They have said that. And there are other fire towers in the area.

Mr RIORDAN: Yes, and I have been asking this for weeks:

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, Deputy Chair—

Mr RIORDAN: will you fund the Mount Gellibrand fire tower? Will you fund the Mount Gellibrand fire tower?

The CHAIR: Deputy Chair, Mr Riordan, your time has expired.

Ms NEVILLE: They have not asked me to.

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, your time has expired.

Mr RIORDAN: The CFA has not asked you to fund it?

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, your time has expired and you are out of order, and I would ask that when you ask a question you respectfully give someone an opportunity to answer it. Mr Gary Maas—

Mr RIORDAN: The minister said she has not been asked.

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, you no longer have the call.

Mr RIORDAN: It has been in every paper for the last month and she is saying she has not heard it.

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, your time has expired. You no longer have the call. Mr Gary Maas, MP.

Mr MAAS: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Minister. If I could take you to fire services reform implementation and specifically budget paper 3, page 104, ‘Output initiatives’, and page 113, ‘Asset initiatives’, I was hoping you would be able to provide the committee with an outline of that investment and how it has been targeted to support fire services reform.

Ms NEVILLE: Thank you, Mr Maas, for that. Look, again, our budget actually provides some of the biggest increases in support for the CFA and for fire services implementation that they have ever had. It certainly does not include any cuts—that we have seen in the past. So the budget delivers \$231 million, which is part of an overall five-year, \$250 million package. So firstly that includes \$126 million, which is all about CFA capability and support and realignment to a volunteer-only organisation. For example, things like health and safety training—so how do volunteers deal with low-voltage fuse removal, safe working at heights training. There is a pilot of new respiratory equipment for volunteers to protect them from the harmful effects of bushfire smoke and provision of one set of new-generation personal protective clothing to each of CFA’s 24 000 active operational volunteers. There are volunteer support measures that may include admin support—BASOs. Anyone who has got a CFA in their area will know and have met their local BASOs, who do a great job. Certainly Ange in my area is well known and well loved by volunteers and also the career staff in the area. Further peer support, crew leader training—increased capacity to train new volunteers. So when we talk about, ‘Are we providing support for volunteers?’—this is unprecedented support for volunteers for training, to ensure our volunteers get the support they need, have the skills they need. I want to make sure every single volunteer comes home from any fire that they have fought in, as does the chief officer, and this package goes significantly to that.

There is money for ageing CFA fire stations and 50 new dual-cab firefighting appliances—so really significant investments in the CFA—in this budget, which is all, you know, as a result of making sure that the CFA can grow, can expand and can be the best volunteer agency in the country and in the world. That is what this investment is all about.

Mr MAAS: Terrific, thank you. If I could take you to budget paper 3, page 106, which refers to funding for the replacement of 15 stations and a new station at Clyde, would you be able to provide some detail on how these 15 stations have been determined and how they will support volunteers in those communities?

Ms NEVILLE: Yes. So of course we took advice from the CFA. They have an extensive prioritisation program about what are the next stations that need either new stations or significant refurbishment. And do not forget that we have had this program, the replacement of 15 stations, but we have also had—which we may or may not get time to talk about today—other investments around refurbishment, and significant numbers of CFA stations have been able to access this. So they take into account the age, the fabric of the building, the risk environment—are there issues around safety for volunteers as well, so where you might not have proper turnaround areas that are safe. There may have been changes to road and transport networks that slow down response times. So all of those factors are taken into account as well as of course occupational health and safety issues.

So some of the stations that are being upgraded as part of this are a new station at The Basin, which replaces a 37-year-old building; and St Leonards, which is in my area—a 38-year-old building; it will now be on a major road and actually improve its response times there. In Golden Square a 70-year-old building is being replaced. In Warracknabeal, a 40-year-old building, and in Clyde, a new station there, which is replacing a 40-year-old building. In terms of some of our rural urban ones: in Coldstream, a new station there—a 37-year-old building is being replaced; in Modewarre a building that is being replaced that was 30 years old; and in Dimboola a 30-year-old building is being replaced. Some of our rural ones: Hoddles Creek, Pyalong, Litchfield—again, all buildings from 37 to 60 years old. Some of our remote ones: Dartmoor, a 40-year-old building; Molka, a 45-year-old building. So there is really significant investment right across the state.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. Mr David Limbrick, MLC.

Mr D O'Brien interjected.

The CHAIR: Mr M. O'Brien, you do not have the call.

Ms Vallence interjected.

The CHAIR: Ms Vallence, you are out of order. Mr David Limbrick, MLC, has the call.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister and team, again. On budget paper 3, page 3, there is a line item 'Inspector-General for Emergency Management inquiry into Victoria's 2019–20 fire season'. This seems like a sensible thing to look at how emergency management systems worked and how they could maybe be improved. Is there a plan to do something similar into emergency management systems and their response to the pandemic?

Ms NEVILLE: Yes. So the inspector-general basically reviews every emergency. He is there from day one. He sits in on state control team meetings. So, yes, he will be and is looking at the COVID response and has been throughout this period in regular contact with me about where there have been any issues as well as with the commissioner.

Mr LIMBRICK: I am just wondering why that was not a line item then in the budget if that is the case, or is it not—

Ms NEVILLE: Well, in relation to the bushfire one he specifically came to us requesting additional resources. He felt that he needed to, given the nature of that. Now, that is not to say he will not in relation to COVID as well, but he has not at this point.

Mr LIMBRICK: Understood. And with budget paper 3, page 288, the overall fire and emergency management budget was well over what was intended or what was originally budgeted in the 2019–20 budget. Is most of that over-budget amount related to the fire season or are there other things in there related to reform?

Ms NEVILLE: Look, most of that will be in relation to bushfires—additional resources that are required for bushfires. Again, not predictable mounts.

Mr LIMBRICK: Okay. And so there would not be asset purchases in there. I am just trying to think what sort of things we are talking about when we are looking at that \$300-odd million over budget.

Ms NEVILLE: It would be the establishment of Bushfire Recovery Victoria, for example. That is probably the biggest component of that.

Mr LIMBRICK: Right. Okay. Understood. Also with regard to the systems, I know that during the 2019–20 fire season there was the app which showed all of that, and that has been used during the pandemic as well for showing areas where there might be outbreaks and things like this. Is this something that has worked well during the pandemic and something that might be improved during the rest of the state of emergency?

Ms NEVILLE: Yes. So firstly we operate as an all-hazards system through the State Control Centre. That means those apps are used for floods, fires, earthquakes—all of those things. And obviously we then have used it during the pandemic. There is money in the budget to improve and update the app as well. So we want to continue to strengthen that. I cannot remember the figures, but there is an extraordinary take-up and use and downloads of those apps. So we will continue to do that and look at opportunities to use that app as, I suppose, people's reliable way of getting access to information about particular emergencies—2.5 million people now have that app downloaded.

Mr LIMBRICK: I have it too, and during the bushfire it was essential, I thought. But during the pandemic I have noticed that a lot of the alerts are sort of statewide alerts and not localised, and I am thinking that now that the pandemic is in a sort of different stage maybe those localised alerts might be something that is more essential—so, you know, 'There is an outbreak in this area'.

Ms NEVILLE: Yes. And, look, we can do that. The commissioner and I often have this discussion about how to make sure you use it in a way that does not diminish its value either. So you do not want to overuse it when you use it but, I think, be able to localise it. So if we ended up with a localised outbreak, any particular issues or risk we can target, and I think that is something that we would absolutely look at doing.

Mr LIMBRICK: And with regard to planning for the state of emergency, we have seen Treasury estimates of when they think various things will happen, like when the vaccine will roll out and when they do these sorts of things. When are you planning on the state of emergency ending? You must have an idea of when you think it will end. Obviously it might change due to circumstances, but—

Ms NEVILLE: Yes, look, at the moment it is a critical part of, and this will obviously be a consideration of, hotel quarantine—the ability to detain people. Without it we cannot do it. So it will continue while we need hotel quarantine.

Mr LIMBRICK: Okay.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Limbrick. Mr Danny O'Brien, MP.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Thank you, Chair. Minister, just going back to your previous answer, you said there were 4000 volunteers who did not complete their training and so were reclassified as support roles. So are you saying that they were previously operational and maybe had been for many years in this situation and have now just been put back into support roles?

Ms NEVILLE: Sometimes people age as well out of wanting to be operational, so that is a decision they make. Steve Warrington, I think it was back in 2018, as the chief officer, said to volunteers—and this was supported by the VFBV—that this is the critical training you need to complete in order to be allowed out on a fireground. So in this financial year 4000 people, some of whom—I cannot give you the exact breakdown—will have aged out and have decided they do not want to continue operationally because of age or health issues and will not have completed that training, and until they do they are not allowed back to be operational.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Okay. So the figure that we have actually lost—according to the budget papers, in 2018–19 there were nearly 38 000 operational volunteers, and we are now down to thirty-four and a half thousand. Is that as a result of them not completing that training in large part?

Ms NEVILLE: As I understand, we are down to 30 977 operational members compared to 34 380 in 2018–19.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Sorry, that current figure, thirty thousand nine—

Ms NEVILLE: That is what is in the budget paper—30 977. Overall the CFA has, I think it is, 174 additional volunteers all up compared to what they had at the same time.

Mr D O'BRIEN: One hundred and seventy-four compared to last year.

Ms NEVILLE: Yes.

Mr D O'BRIEN: So the total number of volunteers according to the budget papers is down considerably. Is that partly due to the inability to complete training because of the COVID restrictions?

Ms NEVILLE: So, as I said, the number of CFA is up overall: the number of operational is down, the number of support is up. As I indicated, most of that is in relation to training. I cannot give you the breakdown of how many people because of age or health have decided that they can no longer be operational. But the other figure I think I gave was: after the bushfires the CFA had 8600 people indicate an interest in volunteering. That is now, after working with people, 1800 who are interested in continuing on through the process. Of course we have not been able to do that because of COVID, but the CFA have now commenced that with those. So I am confident that our volunteers will continue to grow in the CFA.

Mr D O'BRIEN: So apart from being confident, what actual targets or what actual strategies are you employing to recruit more volunteers, operational volunteers in particular?

Ms NEVILLE: Well, I am not sure if you heard what I just spoke about before, but extensive investment in training, extensive investment in PPE—

Mr D O'BRIEN: How much in the next four years?

Ms NEVILLE: Well, \$126 million into the CFA, just on—

Mr D O'BRIEN: In training alone?

Ms NEVILLE: Sorry?

Mr D O'BRIEN: In training?

Ms NEVILLE: No. There is a package, and the CFA are working with the VF BV. Of that package there are at least 15 stations, there are 50 new dual-cab fire trucks, appliances—

Mr D O'BRIEN: That is capital. What is the training component of that—training and recruitment?

Ms NEVILLE: I cannot give you that breakdown here.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Are you able to find out—

Ms NEVILLE: If I can add anything, if there is a breakdown, I will provide it to the committee.

Mr D O'BRIEN: I guess the point is that the number of volunteers—

Ms NEVILLE: The biggest amount in training, the biggest amount into the CFA, for many, many years—certainly not comparable to yours because you cut the CFA budget.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Well, you know that is wrong, Minister.

Ms NEVILLE: No, I do not. I have got a quote from Peter Ryan, in fact, I can read out to you.

Mr D O'BRIEN: No, no, because we had this argument last year when you tried to argue that you doing the same thing was not a cut.

Ms NEVILLE: So all up we have invested \$250 million, most of which is going to the CFA. I would say that that is a pretty substantial investment in the CFA, and it is being worked through with the CFA. There are appliances. There are stations. There is training, as I went through. We have got training centres being rebuilt at the moment for the CFA, including training money for new volunteers, which will include the ones that have shown interest over the last summer and I am sure the ones that will show interest this summer as well.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Yes. Okay. And just to confirm, on notice, if you can tell me how much—

Ms NEVILLE: Oh, sorry—\$11 million increase in training capacity.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Okay. Thank you. Just on that, you talked about more money for stations, and in the previous answer to a government member you talked about the importance of new stations for safety of volunteers et cetera. Why is there no funding for new stations at Yarram, Mirboo North and Foster, which are really dangerous for volunteers because they do not have the space to actually get changed—

The CHAIR: Sorry, Mr O'Brien. Your time has expired. I will pass the call to Ms Pauline Richards, MP.

Ms RICHARDS: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister. I think there will be a good link across to some of the issues I would like to explore, Minister. Many volunteers raise with us the need for better appliances and for more training, so I will give you the opportunity perhaps to expand a little bit to the committee how this investment contributes to addressing these concerns, as outlined in budget paper 3, pages 104 and 106.

Ms NEVILLE: Thanks for the question, and I am happy to expand on what I said before. And hopefully everyone is listening to the investments that we are making so we do not have to repeat them. This budget has funding to replace 50 firefighting appliances for the CFA—particularly ones designed for rural and wildfire responses, so tankers—and the money includes the ability to maintain those as well. We also have a whole lot of money that is provided to the CFA for that fleet maintenance, which has over the years been allowed to go backwards. We inherited a situation where only \$51 million went towards appliances between 2011 and 2014 as well as a situation where the 20-year cap replacement was removed—that policy setting—during that time. So this is about trying to catch up as well as trying to get ahead of the issues in terms of what the CFA needs in terms of its replacement appliances but also the maintenance of its fleet.

In terms of specific training, again I will just run through some of the specific training that is funded in this, and this has been determined by the CFA and by volunteers around priority training. So low-voltage fuse removal training programs—that will be delivered to 70 brigades over four years. So these are brigades that do this, that are part of it, where there is demand for that. There is also a safe working at heights training program, and that will be delivered to about 35 brigades over the four years. Not everyone is going to need to do heights training, so again it has been prioritised towards those that need it. There is also alternative power systems training. There is also money for the trial, as I said, around the new respiratory protection equipment for volunteers—a really important trial to see whether it makes a difference or not in terms of respiratory health. We have also got money for personal protective clothing that is made from new-generation fabric technology and particular garment design, and that will go to each of CFA's operational volunteers. And of course, as I have said before, the real opportunity here for the CFA is: how do they strengthen their support and enhance their support to volunteers? So putting aside all the debates that have happened, I think any of us who have dealt with and worked with volunteers over the last few decades know that there has not been the support that they needed from the organisation. And this is an opportunity, with the funding, with the leadership, to be able to really shift that and make sure our volunteers are getting the support and the training that they need. So there are a number of volunteer support initiatives in there. I have met now with the new chief fire officer, who has been operating since about 30 November.

Jason has extensive experience in really growing a volunteer agency because New South Wales have a volunteer-only agency, so he understands what it is that volunteers are going to need, how we drive the organisation to be a place that volunteers not only want to be but continue to be and to continue that real history of love in communities of the CFA. There are some important investments around ICT systems as well. Like the police, they are a bit outdated, so we are investing in the capability of the CFA, but most importantly, investing in the people that make up the CFA.

Ms RICHARDS: Terrific. Thank you, Minister. So it is a pretty significant suite of reforms. How is the government making sure that there is a strong level of monitoring and independent assurance and oversight being embedded in this system?

Ms NEVILLE: Yes. So one of the things that was set up by the legislation was the establishment of an independent organisation, an independent person, which is the fire services implementation monitor. This will play a really important role in making sure that the outcomes that we are trying to achieve, the progress, the performance measures, are met and they will play a role in being able to—

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. I will pass the call to Mr Sam Hibbins, MP.

Mr HIBBINS: Thanks, Chair. Thanks, Minister and Commissioner and your team, for appearing this morning. There are a number of budget line items in terms of responding to last summer's bushfires, including the review that was referred to recently and a royal commission was obviously undertaken into arrangements, which had a number of recommendations for state governments. Do the government accept the recommendations or do they have a response to the royal commission?

Ms NEVILLE: We have been actively involved in the whole royal commission. I cannot remember—is it 51? It is something like 51 statements that we have put in: policy positions we were asked to provide, documents we were asked to provide. What I would say is that what we welcome about the royal commission are a couple of things. Firstly, it made clear that states and territories needed to continue to be the responsible organisations for emergency response, that it could not be done by a federal government. We have the expertise, we have the knowledge, we are on the ground and I suppose in terms of the Victorian response, which we will do a formal response to, that is the frame in which we will operate in terms of the response to particular—

Mr HIBBINS: Obviously there is that recommendation about the federal government being able, in some circumstances, to act without state authority.

Ms NEVILLE: And we have expressed our significant concern about that and certainly have indicated all along that we will not hand over constitutional powers either in relation to that. So we have had two ministerial councils since the release of the royal commission, and we have, as have other states, indicated that the national declaration of emergency should never be declared without the state agreeing. Firstly, we call ours a state of disaster in a fire. You do not want to create confusion amongst communities. I get that at the moment the legislation before the federal parliament—I am not sure whether it has passed both houses; I think it did—might generate when the ADF or their national resources get used. But the commission did indicate that it should be done in consultation, and only in very, very rare circumstances should the commonwealth act without our support and that would be if we were incapable, like we had no resources and we just could not do it.

Now, that is never going to be the case. My strong view is that the commonwealth should not ever declare it without our ask because that might be when we need commonwealth assistance and support and we confuse communities. We will continue to prosecute that and they have committed to, because they are going to do a second stage of this legislation, consult, which they did not on the first piece of legislation. But the minister, David Littleproud, has committed to doing that. But there are some serious concerns that when you use something like that, in the end it is bad for the community because it actually creates a lack of clarity.

Mr HIBBINS: Thank you. I want to touch on now one of the recommendations around aerial firefighting capability. I have two questions. One is: do you support the recommendation of having a national or a sovereign aerial firefighting capability? And two: within your bushfire response or emergency services capability, has there been any allocated funding to our aerial capability?

Ms NEVILLE: Yes. I will take the second bit first, then come back to the first one.

Mr HIBBINS: We have got 70 seconds.

Ms NEVILLE: We have got 51 contracted where we in a sense purchase in aircraft capability for this season, which is the highest, and then we have access to another 100 aircraft where needed. So that is budgeted for. I think it is in here, but it is done via DELWP. They do the formal contract, so it sits often as a Treasurer's advance; it is often done that way. I think there is room for some national fleet. What you want to get is the balance. Given we have got fires now across the world that are often going longer—often we are getting aircraft from the US and from Canada, and they have had fires going longer—we need to make sure that we do not end up in a situation where you cannot contract for those aircraft. So you do need some capability here for us to use and share, but at the same time you want to have the best technology as well. That is one of the risks of just having everything in one basket, because often these aircraft are uplifted regularly.

Mr HIBBINS: Okay, thanks.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. Mr Tim Richardson.

Mr RICHARDSON: Thank you, Chair. Minister, can I take you to the issue of the Emergency Services Refurbishment Fund. I refer you to budget paper 2, page 92, which outlines the government's building works package as announced in May 2020. I know that there is \$20 million allocated to grants for volunteer emergency services agencies. Minister, for the benefit of the committee can you please explain the benefits of this package and outline the process that has been undertaken to determine those successful grants?

Ms NEVILLE: Yes. Thank you for that question. This is a great fund that we have been able to get out the door really quickly for projects that should be delivered very quickly as well as make a big difference to a number of emergency services organisations. This is part of the package we announced, which was part of the COVID stimulus, and it needed to go to projects that could be delivered very quickly and could deliver local jobs, so making sure that it is not just large building contractors but also small companies in local communities who could get the benefit of this. Part of that was an allocation of \$20 million to the Emergency Services Refurbishment Fund. The Community Safety Building Authority, which sits in DJCS, is responsible for getting this money out the door and making sure the projects are delivered appropriately. We had a selection panel established with experts who were able to identify 125 successful projects, which is significant, and they are all about local jobs and supporting local brigades across a whole range of emergency services organisations. So it was really about maintenance, repairs and OH&S outcomes that we could achieve. Often brigades or organisations had not been able to get small projects funded; you can often get the big ones but not the small ones. So many have gone to those sorts of projects, and of course they needed to be delivered quickly. We had capped it at \$300 000 per project, so that meant it could go to the 125 but it was large enough to be able to deliver some substantive outcomes.

To give you a sense of some of these things, the CFA, for example—there were 24 projects for them. Just to give you a bit of a flavour for those, Leslie Manor fire station, in the Member for Polwarth's area, got an internal modification fit-out—\$122 000. There is installation of male and female amenities, refurbishing the driveway, updates to the kitchen and equipment—really important things that value the volunteers at the station and make their experience when they are there really important. Another one in Mr Riordan's electorate as well is \$100 000 to the Colac fire station for a dedicated turnout room for males and females. Nagambie, the Grampians, South-West Coast—again, there are more improvements there. We have got a roof replacement at the Eltham volunteer fire station. The CFA also have some money to do recladding of a number of stations, also money to do some paving across a whole range of CFA stations and replacing of access doors at CFA stations. So the CFA is delivering that across a number of fire stations. So, again, a really significant investment—small amounts of money that are going to make such a big difference to those CFA stations.

We also put money into the SES. I know the Member for Mordialloc has a very nice new SES building coming his way, very soon hopefully, but 56 projects for the SES were funded through this as well—so Terang, Cobden, Mortlake, Port Campbell, Lorne, Colac, Bannockburn, Lismore, Camperdown, Winchelsea. So it is really significant. That is just an example in one particular area of some work that we are doing with the SES and upgrading particular facilities there.

We have also got money for Life Saving Victoria clubhouses—27 projects there: Anglesea, Wye River, Apollo Bay, Woodside Beach, Half Moon Bay, Mornington Life Saving Club. I think there might be one in Mentone, not quite in your electorate, but I am sure many people in your electorate use the Mentone Life Saving Club—a great area, Mentone and Mordialloc. There is also money for urgent repairs at Wonthaggi Life Saving Club. There is money for Bancoora Surf Life Saving Club. Then we have got money for Marine Search and Rescue. We have really put them on a whole new footing—the Marine Search and Rescue.

Mr RICHARDSON: Fantastic. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. Ms Bridget Vallence, MP.

Ms VALLENCE: Thank you, Chair. Secretary, first up for you. For fire services Victoria can you provide the committee with a breakdown of actual employee expenses, in terms of the dollar amount for each of the expenses, for each and every allowance under the fire services enterprise bargaining agreement and how that compares with the two MFB agreements?

Ms FALKINGHAM: Sorry, Ms Vallence, if we have that information readily available, I am happy to provide it to the committee.

Ms NEVILLE: Just so we are really clear—it is called Fire Rescue Victoria, firstly—all that has happened is as at 1 July the current CFA agreement and the current MFB agreement have been approved by the Fair Work Commission into a combined FRV EBA. So nothing has changed since prior to the establishment of FRV.

Ms VALLENCE: Okay. So in terms of the allowances you are saying that nothing has changed? Through the enterprise bargaining nothing was renegotiated?

Ms NEVILLE: Well, there is an enterprise bargaining process that will commence with FRV when the agreements expire, which will commence probably early next year now. But as at 1 July all that happened was the existing agreements, the existing ones that had already been approved by the Fair Work Commission, have been combined so that there is one agreement because there is now one organisation—the employees are employed by FRV. There have been no increases, no changes to EBA conditions or outcomes as at 1 July.

Ms VALLENCE: So in terms of allowances that are payable under that combined EBA for FRV, in terms of the comparison for prior CFA and MFB people, is there any conflict within that EB when they have been brought together?

Ms NEVILLE: There certainly will need to be some realignment over time, and that will be done through the process of the next EBA so that there is a fair outcome for everyone. It just varies in terms of people having different ranks and so there will be a rank alignment, but that has not been done yet.

Ms VALLENCE: Okay. Any other examples other than rank alignment that you would anticipate to change?

Ms NEVILLE: I do not know. We will go through that process in the EBA. We have not commenced it yet.

Ms VALLENCE: Okay. In terms of budget paper 3, at page 104, the money towards the fire services reform implementation over the forward estimates, how much of that will be invested in Fire Rescue Victoria?

Ms NEVILLE: So that includes \$126 million for the CFA. In addition to that there is also, of the remaining money, there was money for the integrated brigades so that we could have enough space for volunteer space. There were improvements to that. There was also funding to employ additional commanders in order to ensure the CFA had enough commanders. It is not completely like for like, because once you had put everyone over and seconded back you had commanders who used to look after both CFA career and volunteers, so we had to work our way through that. So they are a significant investment—I think it is another 16. There are additional assistant chief fire officers for the CFA and additional commanders—

Ms VALLENCE: So in terms of the breakdown then for Fire Rescue Victoria, are you able to advise the committee what amount to that element?

Ms NEVILLE: If I can do that, I will provide that information to the committee.

Ms VALLENCE: Okay.

Ms NEVILLE: But overwhelmingly the money has gone to the CFA.

Ms VALLENCE: Right. So, do you have a ballpark percentage of—

Ms NEVILLE: Well, I can say 126 clearly is CFA, and then my guess is it is about another—

Look, I would have to come back to you, if I can provide that information.

Ms VALLENCE: Thanks, Minister. And will most of the funding—like the supplemental funding provided by DJCS to the CFA and MFB in the 2019–20 period, which is featured in the annual reports—go all to employee expenses?

Ms FALKINGHAM: We have not yet finalised that, Ms Valence, so we will provide that when it is available in the breakdown that you have required.

Ms VALLENCE: Thank you. And in the budget papers also there is at budget paper 3, page 106, 'Fire Services Reform Implementation'. That initiative provides the replacement of 50 CFA—

Ms NEVILLE: Which I have spoken about twice now—three times actually.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Vallence. Ms Nina Taylor, MLC.

Ms TAYLOR: Yes. I am just wanting to explore bushfire recovery. If I could refer you to budget paper 3, page 3, could you outline the investments the Victorian government is making into Bushfire Recovery Victoria to help communities work through recovery from the 2019–20 eastern Victorian fires?

Ms NEVILLE: Thank you, Ms Taylor, for that question. As I mentioned earlier in my presentation, despite COVID we have continued to have a significant focus on bushfire recovery in the east of the state as well as in the north-east of the state. These communities, you know, are still struggling, and I cannot even imagine what it would be like to have gone through those bushfires and then to find yourself in a situation where you have got COVID. So the normal recovery process that we have, where community recovery committees come together and people are able to work closely—and even clean-up is difficult because you have got to keep people separated—has been made more difficult. It is a testament to those communities that they have continued to do what they have.

I think I mentioned we put in \$450 million. It is actually closer to \$550 million towards the bushfire response, and then in addition to that we have a number of grants where the commonwealth add to that process. We have had the bushfire clean-up, which was one of the key priorities early on to get those properties cleaned up. They were all cleaned up by the end of August, and we are in the process now of people getting, where they can, permits to rebuild and temporary housing put in place as well.

One of the key grants that I think has probably been incredibly successful is some of the small business grants. We have had both a \$10 000 grant and a \$50 000 grant, and then there have also been grants for primary producers, \$75 000 grants. Then again, we had delays in some of the small businesses applying for those grants. I think once COVID hit it was almost like 'What happens now?', like 'What's the assessment for our business?', so we have been able to get an agreement with the commonwealth to extend the dates for those small business grants so that people have a longer opportunity now to assess where they are up to—and that will be until January next year. So we have done a lot of outreach to make sure people do not lose the opportunity to access those grants.

But there has also been significant money that has gone into councils, for example, to help with planning and permit processes. There has been money for a mental health bushfire recovery package—\$23 million for that. We have had emergency payments to families in the immediate aftermath. Fencing repair and upgrades have been a big part of the investment as well as wildlife and biodiversity projects. We have also got our local economic recovery program, so this is funding a number of key projects in local communities. We have had one round of those applications go out, and we will have one not long into the new year, a second round. These are being driven by communities: what are the projects that are both great outcomes for the community but also drive economic value for those communities? Some of the projects that we have funded are the Cudgewa tennis facility, a tree-lined avenue in Tintaldra, \$120 000 for a pedestrian bridge joining Harrietville and \$40 000 for large murals in Mount Beauty—so again both some tourism and local amenity for people as well as those projects that will deliver economic benefit particularly during the building process but where they are tourism projects and long-term projects as well. And as I said, it is community led, so that is the most important bit about this. We have tried to—even though these projects are commonwealth and state, and sometimes there can be a bit of a process about getting both our sign-off and the commonwealth sign-off, we have been able to streamline some of that, which has been really good—again really make sure that this is what the community have driven, what they want and what they want to see in their communities. It has been a really strong and effective process, and we are getting some great projects that are coming up.

Ms TAYLOR: Thank you. That is great. With 21 seconds, I was going to go to emergency management capability, if you wanted to speak a little to that. That was budget paper 3, page 288, but 9 seconds probably is not going to cut it.

Ms NEVILLE: They are very capable. We have got a lot of money for their capability.

The CHAIR: Excellent. Thank you very much, Ms Taylor. Thank you, Minister. Commissioner, that concludes the time we have set aside for consideration of the emergency services estimates. We thank you for appearing before the committee today. The committee will follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing, and responses will be required within 10 working days of the committee's request.

The committee will now take a short break before resuming consideration with you of the water portfolio.

I declare this hearing adjourned.

Witnesses withdrew.