

# **PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE**

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

Melbourne – Tuesday 19 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**

Jo de Morton, Secretary,

Lisa Gandolfo, Deputy Secretary, Consumer Affairs and Local Government,

John Batho, Deputy Secretary, Digital Transformation,

Gayle Porthouse, Deputy Secretary, Corporate Shared Services,

Nicole Rich, Executive Director, Regulatory Services and Director, Consumer Affairs Victoria,

Steven Wlazly, Chief Finance Officer,

Dan Harper, Lead Director, Emergency Coordination, Resilience and Local Government Emergencies, and

Dovid Clarke, Chief Information Security Officer and Executive Director, Data and Digital Resilience, Department of Government Services.

**The CHAIR:** I declare open this hearing of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee, and 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 the committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. However, 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.

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

I welcome the Secretary of Government Services Ms Jo de Morton, as well as other officials. Secretary, I am going to invite you to make an opening statement or presentation of no more than 10 minutes, after which time committee members will ask you some questions.

**Jo de MORTON:** Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon, committee. I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the lands we gather on today and pay my respects to elders past and present.

We are very proud to have recently delivered our annual report for our new department's first full year of operations. We have made significant progress to deliver improved government services, and I really welcome the opportunity to share that with the committee today.

**Visual presentation.**

**Jo de MORTON:** This year we have continued our focus on digital customer services. More than 2.8 million Victorians have the popular Service Victoria app downloaded on their phones, and most have a Service Victoria account that lets them tell us once when they use the platform. We offer the most digital cards of any jurisdiction, such as the new digital driver licences, working with children checks and seniors cards. Victoria is the first jurisdiction in Australia to offer fully online identity proofing, and since launching that in 2019 we have securely and privately verified identities more than 2.6 million times. Victoria is still the only jurisdiction to be able to offer worker screening checks like working with children and the national disability insurance scheme fully end to end online. To support people who have difficulty online we have also consolidated five of our inherited contact centres into one single contact number for Victorians, 132 VIC, and that is improving performance, with most calls now answered in less than 1 minute.

I know the committee will be really pleased to hear that this work, along with better processes and technology improvements, is delivering improved services for Victorians wanting to register a birth, death or marriage and receive a certificate. Certificate applications are now assessed in just four days on average, and the longest wait times have reduced significantly, with birth certificates now processed within two weeks and marriage and change of name certificates issued within four weeks. As a result of these improvements far fewer customers need support, and those that do can now get it quickly by calling 132 VIC.

As well as our focus on making it easier to transact with government, the department also does important work making sure Victorians get a fair go in their consumer market transactions. We know that the cost of living is a concern for many people, and renting is one of the biggest expenses people have. This year we have launched our renters portal on the Service Victoria platform to bring together easy-to-understand information to help renters exercise their rights and rental providers understand their obligations. It complements the popular Savings Finder, which has helped thousands of families find discounts on offer right across the Victorian government.

These initiatives build on important work in the consumer affairs portfolio to implement the housing statement and other initiatives to give renters more certainty over their finances, their living standards and their leases. To support renters with rising rental costs we have completed more than 7000 excessive rent reviews. We have administered additional funding that supported more than 9000 Victorians with renter assistance and more than 23,000 people with financial counselling. We are also working to keep the costs associated with new rentals down by implementing reforms to ban all types of rental bidding and building a portable bond scheme so renters can carry their bonds to the next rental.

When cost of living is tough people look for cheaper properties to rent, and they can be of a poorer standard. This year our campaign to raise awareness on rental minimum standards saw almost 200,000 views to the website, and our new renting taskforce is inspecting rental properties across Victoria to make sure they meet minimum standards. They have already issued more than \$450,000 in fines. We are also implementing reforms to give renters greater certainty over their leases, like banning no-fault evictions, so they can be more confident to exercise their rights. For times when issues do arise we are working closely with VCAT to establish Rental Dispute Resolution Victoria to implement a new one-stop shop to resolve issues quickly and fairly.

One of the most significant expenses for Victorians in the consumer marketplace is building a home, and this year we have supported government to introduce new legal protections so people are covered by insurance before giving any money to a builder for works over \$16,000. We have paid \$19.3 million to 864 successful applicants affected by liquidated builders.

Alongside our important work in the consumer marketplace, the department also supports services by local councils by making sure that Victoria's system of local government is responsive, accountable and efficient. This year we have supported the government to introduce a suite of reforms to improve standards of behaviour and integrity in Victorian councils, including additional mandatory training, a new uniform code of conduct and strengthened powers to address councillor behaviour. Central to this is work to make council performance across Victoria more transparent to the community. We monitor and report on council financial performance through the mandatory local government performance reporting framework. Council satisfaction with our advice improved this year from 76 per cent up to 88 per cent as a result of the greater engagement and guidance that the team provided to help councils meet their obligations. The department also administers grant funding that supports a range of services, including \$51.4 million for public libraries. We traditionally think of libraries as somewhere to borrow a book, but here too technology is changing the nature of their services, and the infrastructure is supporting broader community uses.

Another priority focus area for our department is internal services to government. We have continued to develop a corporate shared services operating model to serve our first few customer departments, being the Department of Premier and Cabinet and the Department of Treasury and Finance, as well as ourselves. We have also started the preparatory work to onboard the three departments onto our new whole-of-government HR platform, VicGov People, and continued our support to the Department of Transport and Planning as the first department that is onboarded. Our new grants centre is now delivering services for six departments. We are also focused on making it easier for government to buy goods and services, as well as for suppliers to engage with government. A new digital marketplace puts almost 2000 registered suppliers in front of all government buyers, who can confidently identify businesses by capability and region, as well as certified social enterprises

and Aboriginal-owned businesses. We will be continuing to add more state purchase contracts and registers to the marketplace over the coming year.

Underpinning everything we do as a department is our reform agenda for the data, digital infrastructure, technology platforms and capabilities that power our services. As we continue to digitise more government services and we have more people doing business online, connectivity becomes even more important. Our Connecting Victoria program delivered 462 upgrade projects, as well as free public wi-fi for Melbourne's CBD, Bendigo and Ballarat, to improve mobile and internet access for households and businesses.

It is also important that people can access online services safely. DGS's cyber defence centre responded to more than 1500 threat intelligence activities or incidents during the year and continues to operate the critical 24/7 cyber incident response service. We also have a proactive cyber intelligence program where we scan the environment and keep across trends and activities of cybercriminals. We know there are steps Victorians can take to increase their online safety, so we have been running a series of awareness campaigns to highlight these, like our password strength tester and online safety check. We have also been developing the cyber skills of the public service with five certificate IV cybersecurity graduates taking part in a cyber internship program.

We are always looking to understand the transformative potential of emerging technologies, and artificial intelligence has been a particular focus. We have developed policies and guidance to support the safe and responsible use of generative AI tools across the public service, and we are trialling an internal AI chatbot to help our contact centre staff answer questions quickly and accurately. The pilot is also informing how we can deploy AI in a safe and ethical way. In addition to this we are working with the Australian Information Industry Association and drawing on the expertise of their members to identify how the public service can best leverage existing and new technologies to deliver operational efficiencies and service improvements.

So, Chair, that is just a snapshot of some of the achievements and milestones of our new department's first full financial year of operations. Thank you for the opportunity to share this progress with you and the committee members.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much, Secretary. The first 13 minutes is going to go to Mrs McArthur.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Thank you, Chair, and thank you, team. I refer to page 8 of the questionnaire and the public libraries funding program. Historically, the operation of public libraries has been funded 50–50 in a partnership between state government and local councils. Over the previous three financial years, has the state government maintained its commitment to funding 50 per cent of public libraries?

**Jo de MORTON:** The state makes an important contribution to the role of public libraries in fostering lifelong learning, facilitating access to information and providing safe and supportive community spaces. Since funding for libraries began, the investment has grown significantly over time, but so have the services councils choose to provide to their communities through libraries. So it is a matter for each of Victoria's councils to determine their own council budgets in consultation with their community. Similarly, all decisions about delivery and programming are made at the local level and library services are not directed from the –

**Bev McARTHUR:** Maybe you could just table what you are reading from. Just table it.

**The CHAIR:** Excuse me, Mrs McArthur. You asked the question, and the Secretary has the answer. I am sure you would welcome hearing the answer. Please continue, Secretary.

**Bev McARTHUR:** To save us some time she could just send it to us.

**The CHAIR:** Please continue, Secretary.

**Jo de MORTON:** Since 2019–20 the formula used to calculate library funding was suspended as a result of the 2018 parliamentary inquiry into council financial sustainability, which found that the grants formula based on population size disadvantaged rural councils with low populations. So we have maintained funding to all recipients uniformly, static in line with state averages, since that time.

**Bev McARTHUR:** So 50–50?

**Jo de MORTON:** Like I said, every council makes their own decision about how they fund libraries.

**Bev McARTHUR:** No, no, you do not supply the funding to libraries at a 50–50 rate, and so they have to top it up out of ratepayer money. Why have you gone back from a 50–50 funding of libraries?

**Jo de MORTON:** I do not think it has been 50–50 per cent funding of libraries for quite some time.

**Bev McARTHUR:** It was originally.

**Dan HARPER:** There were two years in the 1970s; that was the last time that we were 50–50 funding.

**Bev McARTHUR:** This is cost shifting on steroids. We have just had a local government inquiry, and every council has referred to it. What is the total funding amount for libraries in the last financial year – \$51.4 million? Is that what you told us?

**Jo de MORTON:** Correct.

**Bev McARTHUR:** So you have said that councils make their own decisions about what they do in libraries, but the government have said they should roll out the rainbow toolkit. That was not a local government decision; that is a state government policy to suggest that five-year-olds can announce what pronoun they want to use.

**Dan HARPER:** Public Libraries Victoria was funded to develop the rainbow toolkit as part of funding that we allocate to them to do a series of statewide projects. It was suggested by them to develop that material for library staff. They are a group of library professionals. \$14,020 was provided through the public libraries funding program to do that, and that has now since been rolled out.

**Bev McARTHUR:** So they have had no say in it. You have just rolled it out.

**Dan HARPER:** No, it is not a mandatory document. Councils do not have to use it. It is purely guidance for council staff to have respectful –

**Bev McARTHUR:** How many have taken it up?

**Dan HARPER:** We do not have those statistics. It has been provided to all libraries, and they can choose to use all or some of the document so they can have conversations with their communities in a safe and respectful manner.

**Bev McARTHUR:** So the running costs of public libraries should be recurrent funding and budgeted for. Why was a Treasurer's advance required?

**Dan HARPER:** The funding comes through to the department through its appropriations. It is a matter for the Department of Treasury and Finance as to how the department receives that. In order to ensure that the library funding was maintained at the same level as the previous year, the Treasurer's advance was provided to the department to see that occur.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** It is not Treasury and Finance that decides. You have to actually request a Treasurer's advance.

**Dan HARPER:** Yes, they set the appropriation amount at the start, and then we requested a TA to ensure that the funding remained at the previous year's level.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Secretary, is that a concern to you that, effectively – and this is pretty much what Treasury told us yesterday – the department is being underfunded in the budget up-front and then topped up throughout the year by a Treasurer's advance?

**Mathew HILAKARI:** They never said that.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** On a point of order, Chair, that is not what they said.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Well, set the appropriation for the department and then had to get the Treasurer's advance later to cover the cost of libraries, which is not either unforeseen or urgent.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** That is not the evidence that was given.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Well, what is it then? That is what I am trying to ask the witnesses.

**The CHAIR:** Mr O'Brien, Ms Kathage has a point of order.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** She did not say, 'On a point of order'.

**The CHAIR:** That is not an invitation for you to speak, Mr O'Brien. Ms Kathage, you had a point of order.

*Members interjecting.*

**Lauren KATHAGE:** On a point of order, Chair, the representation of the evidence that was given yesterday was an incorrect representation. They spoke about appropriations, including a decision that part of the appropriation is kept in contingency and is released through a Treasurer's advance when certain milestones are met, not that there is underfunding, as Mr O'Brien has –

**Danny O'Brien** interjected.

**The CHAIR:** Mr O'Brien, perhaps you want to just rephrase the question in light of time and moving forward, please?

**Danny O'BRIEN:** The question stands, Secretary. The concern is, and this is completely in line with Ms Kathage's very important point, that funding is released in terms of milestones in a project. There are no milestones for funding of public libraries; it is funded throughout the year. There is no, 'Oh, you had 24 people come through, so you get some money.' The question stands. How does the department manage funding for public libraries when it has to wait for Treasury to sign off on it halfway through the year?

**Jo de MORTON:** There is a budget amount allocated for libraries, and then government makes decisions about whether or not to invest anything further. We certainly put the case forward that maintaining funding for libraries is important in acknowledgement of the significant use of them now as community hubs and as spaces for the community to go to and in acknowledgement of all the significant increase in the use of digital library services. I think you will see that our performance measures in the budget papers do not currently reflect that, and that is work we are working on in consultation with the library sector at the moment to make sure that we can properly advocate for the fantastic work that libraries do and put that case to government as part of the budget cycle for them to consider.

**Bev McARTHUR:** But in many cases, most libraries you are only funding by 20 per cent; councils are providing 80 per cent of the funding. So why do you need a Treasurer's advance? But anyway, have you applied for one for this year, a Treasurer's advance?

**Jo de MORTON:** For the current budget cycle, the amounts are as they are in the budget papers, and then for next year the budget process is just underway at the moment. We will be putting forward the usual case for libraries as part of that process.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Do you anticipate putting in a request for a Treasurer's advance for libraries this financial year?

**Jo de MORTON:** Not further outside the budget.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Okay, so the appropriation is right this year. It is just last year that it was underfunded and had to be topped up by Treasury. Anyway, sorry, Mrs McArthur.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Let us go to monitors in local government. What is the total cost of monitors being paid for by ratepayers in Victoria, as you insist on monitors in various councils?

**Lisa GANDOLFO:** Thanks for the question, member. As you say, monitors are paid for by councils at a cost of \$1335 per day, and the council is required to meet their remuneration and expenses. In terms of the total cost, that is something that I will have to try and find before the end of the committee meeting. I do not have the total cost of all councils.

**Bev McARTHUR:** That is fine. Will you take it on notice?

**Lisa GANDOLFO:** I can take that question on notice.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Thank you. Why would you have monitors in place now – going forward at \$1300 per person per day, with two in Geelong, for example – when we have got a whole raft of new councillors elected? You have kept them in a job at \$1335 a day until January. Why would that be?

**Lisa GANDOLFO:** There is a range of evidence that would be put before the minister around the support that might be needed at that council. That information would come from various reports and recommendations, including from the Local Government Inspectorate, and based on information from the monitors themselves, from their reports, which are published online, and other sources, the minister takes a decision about whether the monitors are needed to continue to support good governance at that council. So there is some more work that needs to be done.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Do you have any role in checking on why a monitor might be needed?

**Lisa GANDOLFO:** Yes. We provide information to the minister from all the sources available to us. We meet with monitors, we read their reports and we provide that to the minister for a decision.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Take Geelong city council for example, which has a CEO being paid more than the Premier, over \$500,000. She has other appointments – chairman of the Alpine Resorts Commission and the showgrounds society or whatever it is. Why would somebody at that remuneration need also to have monitors to supervise governance? Wouldn't that be her day job?

**Lisa GANDOLFO:** It is the job of the CEO of the council and councillors to ensure good governance of their local council, and in some cases there are still things that need improvement. When that is the case, monitors are assigned to that council.

**Bev McARTHUR:** How could there be things needing to be improved when there are a whole new raft of councils being elected in a raft councils across my electorate, let alone Victoria. How could there be things still needing monitors?

**Lisa GANDOLFO:** Well, there are still legacy issues from councils prior.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Like what?

**Lisa GANDOLFO:** That would depend on each and every council and each and every monitor, Mrs McArthur.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Well, tell us about Geelong.

**Lisa GANDOLFO:** I might need to take that question specifically on notice for Geelong.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Great. That would be terrific if you could find out exactly why we continue to need monitors in Geelong, Colac and Horsham.

**The CHAIR:** Mrs McArthur –

**Bev McARTHUR:** Yes, Chair?

**The CHAIR:** As much as I do not like to interrupt you –

**Bev McARTHUR:** You like my question.

**The CHAIR:** Mrs McArthur, I am just going to remind you of my statement that I made at the beginning of this session: I expect all members to treat witnesses with the respect that they deserve. Ms Gandolfo is genuinely attempting to answer your questions and providing further context and explanation around some the questions that you have asked about councils.



**Bev McARTHUR:** Thank you, Chair. Well, let us go to a very easy question. What are the criteria for a monitor to be in place in a council?

**Lisa GANDOLFO:** Monitors are appointed when there is a risk to good governance at the council. Their role is to guide good governance and support councils to better serve their communities. Whilst they are there their role is to make recommendations to the Minister for Local Government in relation to the exercise of legislative powers at the council. They attend council meetings, they observe council meetings, they look at councillor briefings and observe councillor briefings and they review governance policies, processes and procedures.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** That is what they do, Ms Gandolfo. We are interested in the criteria. You said it is where there are concerns about governance, but what specifically prompts those concerns?

**Lisa GANDOLFO:** What prompts those concerns are reports where that good governance has failed.

**Bev McARTHUR:** So when the CEO rings up the minister to say she needs a monitor, with no knowledge at all from councillors about anything going wrong, that is all that is required?

**Lisa GANDOLFO:** I do not think that would meet the threshold, no.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Well, that is exactly what happened. So, a risk to good governance, but surely if we have got new councillors coming there is no risk.

**The CHAIR:** Apologies, Mrs McArthur, your time is up. We are going to go to Mr Galea.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon, Secretary and officials. Thank you for joining us. Secretary, I would like to talk about something that you touched on in your presentation, but which is also referenced in this year's budget papers in the department performance standards on page 56, and that is mobile infrastructure projects delivered. I understand that DGS, through the Connecting Victoria program and other programs, plays a significant role in expanding mobile coverage for outer suburban Melbourne and for regional Victoria as well. Notwithstanding the fact that this is actually a federal government responsibility, it is another area in which the Victorian government has been stepping in. I can tell you in my area in Clyde North we have had the first phone tower in the Ramleigh Park estate switched on. That was funded through Connecting Victoria, and it has made a huge difference. We are looking forward to many more projects that are currently in the pipeline. I could probably talk to you for the whole time about Clyde North and why it has been such an important program for that area, but from a broader perspective could you talk to the program and what sort of impact it has been having across Victoria?

**Jo de MORTON:** Yes, we would be happy to. I agree about the importance of connectivity in today's modern world. That is the responsibility of Deputy Secretary Batho, so I am going to let him speak to that.

**John BATHO:** Thanks, Secretary. Thanks for the question, Mr Galea. As you mentioned, the Connecting Victoria program delivers broadband and telecommunications upgrades to ensure digital connectivity right across the state. I think it is so important, in today's world particularly, to make sure that Victorians are digitally connected. Being digitally excluded is actually a really significant risk for many people and can have detrimental impacts. For example, it prevents individuals, families and communities from being able to access essential government services, jobs in the digital economy and all the personal benefits of being connected, and that is where the Connecting Victoria program, as you outlined, is trying to address these digital inclusion challenges. Over 64 per cent of the Connecting Victoria programs are looking to do upgrades that are benefiting regional communities, and the remaining 36 per cent are providing much-needed infrastructure upgrades for communities in Melbourne's growth corridors.

We had a really busy year in the 2023–24 financial year within the program. For mobile infrastructure the program entered its peak delivery phase with 401 upgrades being completed, which exceeded the performance target of 275. These upgrades provided new mobile coverage and improved 5G mobile coverage right across the state, and for broadband infrastructure, 61 upgrades were completed, meeting the target for the 2023–24 financial year. That builds on the total program rollout of the Connecting Victoria program. As of 31 October this year, the program has delivered 660 upgrades, including 538 mobile infrastructure upgrades and 122 broadband upgrades. Overall, the program, once completed, is looking to deliver around 1200 mobile

upgrades right across the state, and that is a rolling deployment schedule up until 2026. Each of those projects are looking to either improve the coverage, capacity or resilience of our mobile networks. As part of the program, every regional and peri-urban local government area in Victoria will either receive a mobile upgrade or benefit from improved mobile coverage through investment in a neighbouring municipality. There will be more than 1100 locations, and over 23,000 square kilometres across Victoria will benefit from the program.

The broadband part of the program will deliver 150 upgrades providing high-speed broadband, and that will include replacing ageing copper broadband infrastructure with fibre-optic cables or high-speed wireless services. The majority of the broadband program should be delivered by mid-2025.

**Michael GALEA:** Excellent. Thank you. It is good to note the broadband component of that as well. It is such an important essential service these days for all Victorians to be able to access that mobile and broadband connectivity. In that same estate I referenced earlier we had some NBN lines disrupted by some construction work inadvertently about a year ago, and that meant that people could not connect on their mobile or the NBN, which caused a lot of issues for some people, so to have these networks up in place funded by Connecting Victoria has been transformational for those communities. It is very good to hear, and for colleagues in western Victoria I understand there have been some projects on the outskirts of Ballarat as part of the program too which have been really valuable.

Shifting from that core network provision but still on the same subject, with the weather events that we have seen this year on top of many of our recent years and the effect that storms in particular can have on our telecommunications network, I understand that there have been a number of these projects that have been going to support the resilience of mobile phone towers and the like across Victoria. I understand from the questionnaire that there was a target last year of 275 projects. That has actually been exceeded to just over 400. Is that correct?

**John BATHO:** That is right.

**Michael GALEA:** Can you please talk to me about the impact that those projects have had?

**John BATHO:** Yes, I am really happy to, and thank you for the questions, Mr Galea. Just before I respond directly to your question, I might just provide a little bit of context about the overarching responsibilities for our telecommunications infrastructure resilience. The Commonwealth has primary responsibility for the telecommunications sector within Australia and the adequacy of that telecommunications service right across the country. Our role as the state government is that we perform a complementary role to help target national policy and program settings and also do targeted investment as well to improve the resilience of Victoria's telecommunications infrastructure, with a particular focus on making sure that we are equipped to respond to emergency events. As you mentioned, Mr Galea, there have been a number particularly in the 2023–24 financial year that we have had to respond to as a state. Under the Victorian government emergency management arrangements the department is the lead support agency for the public commercial telecommunications networks. We have got a real focus on making sure that we have got the resilient infrastructure that the Victorian community needs to stay safe during an emergency. We played an important role during the 2023–24 events to coordinate restoration of coverage with telecommunications providers and also with the energy sector through the State Control Centre.

Just to go to your direct question, I am happy to provide a bit more information about how some of the investment through the Connecting Victoria program is building the resilience of our network. Across the program there are a number of projects and types of upgrades which we are funding. These can be everything from removing mobile black spots to improving the resilience of mobile phone towers through longer lasting battery backup and mobile base stations, which means when the power goes out we do not lose connectivity because we have got backup power at the mobile sites; building new base stations and upgrading signal strength as well at existing base stations to improve mobile data speeds and service quality; accelerating upgrades of 3G and 4G services to 5G to enable better access for the next generation communication devices; and also assisting other mobile network operators to expand their coverage into poorly serviced areas.

**Nick McGOWAN:** The back of Parliament?

**John BATHO:** Sorry?

**Nick McGOWAN:** The back of Parliament. I am just pointing out the back of Parliament has got terrible reception.

**John BATHO:** I did not know that, Mr McGowan. In the 2023–24 financial year DGS delivered 85 significant projects with carriers to improve the resilience of mobile towers in at-risk locations. These projects include upgrading battery backup for mobile towers and installing permanent generators or preparing mobile tower sites to withstand bushfire threat. So that gives you a sense of some of the types of Connecting Victoria upgrade projects which are underway to improve the resilience of our network.

**Michael GALEA:** Absolutely. Personally, I am much more interested in getting some much-needed upgrades to those bushfire-affected areas than perhaps Spring Street, but whether it is the inner city, outer suburban Melbourne or across Victoria, that is really important stuff. I know my colleague the Member for Monbulk has been very active on this as well, and these sorts of projects are going to potentially mean life or death for some people, so it is really good to see that investment.

Just one point you made as well, which we have been discussing on this topic, is that this is of course the responsibility of the Commonwealth government, and Victoria is stepping in to fill, shall we say, the gap. Is there much work that has been going on between DGS and federal government programs, or are the programs which we are talking about just being done in that vacuum of, ‘Something needs to be done, so we’re doing it’?

**John BATHO:** Thank you for the question, Mr Galea. I think there are a number of streams of work which are underway. Some of them are longstanding engagements with the Commonwealth, where the Commonwealth issues funding through various programs for telecommunication infrastructure across the state. The department works really closely with our federal counterparts to help inform how the federal government will target that investment to best meet the needs of Victorians. That is the longstanding collaboration that we have had with the federal government.

In addition to that, there are a number of critical reviews which are being undertaken by the Australian government at the moment, such as the regional telecommunications review. We have been supporting the Minister for Government Services to make submissions to that review to make sure that Victorian government policy settings are set right for the needs of Victorians.

Then thirdly as well, with the switch-off of 3G only recently we have been leaning in very closely with our federal counterparts and with the carriers to make sure that the planning for that was orderly and there were not any unintended impacts on Victorians as part of that 3G switch-off.

**Michael GALEA:** Excellent. Thank you. I am going to cybersecurity. Just in terms of noting that there is funding for the creation of the cyber defence centre through the budget years – we are looking, 2023–24 – I am just wondering if you could give me a brief outline of what the cyber defence centre is and what it is going to be set up to achieve.

**John BATHO:** The establishment of the Cyber Defence Centre was a real priority for us during the 2023–24 financial year, and that was due to the \$34 million investment which was made to set up the centre. That really enabled DGS to take our centralised cybersecurity capabilities and functions to the next level to provide a whole-of-government view as to what the threats were and the changing cybersecurity landscape as well as to expand our service offering to support other departments and agencies right across the Victorian bureaucracy.

I am happy to go into a bit more information about some of the work of the Cyber Defence Centre. At a high level the centre has improved our ability to identify, detect and block potential cybersecurity threats to public sector IT networks and also has expanded the department’s capacity to respond to major incidents, provide threat intelligence to get ahead of those incidents and a greater digital forensic capability to enable us to understand the causes of those incidents and enable us to be better prepared for the future. We also have real-time vulnerability detection across our public sector network, so we know if threat actors are trying to penetrate public sector networks. There are a number of specific initiatives and programs which fit under those broad categories which I have spoken to. I will give you just some examples of the work that has been underway over the last 12 months. We have implemented automation of security feeds and threat intelligence as well to take the manual work out of that threat monitoring.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr Batho. Thank you, Mr Galea. We will go to the Deputy Chair.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Thank you, Secretary. Secretary, I am just curious how the government arrived at the 132 VIC number. Is it because the government cannot count? It is not 123; it is 132 VIC.

**Jo de MORTON:** I think you will find that it is the normal sequence for telephone numbers to start with 13, so we just added the VIC component as something easy to remember.

**Nick McGOWAN:** It is the numbers I was worried about. I have never heard of this 132 VIC number. Do you spend any money publicising it?

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Good that you are more informed.

**Nick McGOWAN:** I am informed now; I just do not know whether Victorians are informed, the people we are supposed to be serving. Do you spend any money advertising this number?

**Jo de MORTON:** Not yet. The websites are where you get the help from. The idea is that most people prefer to try digital transactions. When they are not successful at the time that they are having a problem, it will pop up and say, 'Here's where you can get some more help from.' They can choose whether they want to go on webchat, because a lot of people do not like talking to people on the phone. They would rather just put a message –

**Nick McGOWAN:** Really? I would love to see that research. In my experience in life, people much prefer to speak to a human being than to a chatbot.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** That is your generation.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** You are showing your age.

**Jo de MORTON:** Yes, I do not think you are representative. But you are right, if you are one of the people who does not like to use the technology and you prefer to speak to someone, then that option is there. But we make sure that that range of options is there, so the number pops up in real time when you are in the middle of the task that you are trying to do.

**Nick McGOWAN:** It is interesting that you mentioned the website. I had a look at your performance data here. You set yourself a target for the department's own site of 160,000 visits, and they managed something in the order of 64,000. What is the discrepancy there? Why are so few people visiting their website?

**Jo de MORTON:** I am not sure what you are referring to there, because we had a significant increase.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Questionnaire page 11.

**Dan HARPER:** That is in relation to the Know Your Council website.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Know Your Council – what happened?

**Jo de MORTON:** That relates to the local government performance reporting framework. When councils complete their data collection, the team consolidates those data points and puts them all together in one place where you can compare different councils to each other. When the department began, the platform that was running on was at end of life. It was ageing and it could not be continued. What we have done is retire that piece of legacy technology. It took us a minute to recreate a new version on the modern single digital presence platform, which is our new platform for all government websites, so what you are seeing is a bit of a transition period where people did not have the service available. The other thing that I think you will notice is the old measure for that used to count page views, and we were doing a bit of work on what is a better way to really understand who is using the platform. You do not want to count the number of pages I click on; you want to know how many people are there, so we are trying to really understand that measure a bit better and give something a bit more meaningful to readers and to the committee around the usefulness of that platform to people.

**Nick McGOWAN:** What are the figures for the new website? Do you have those to hand?

**Jo de MORTON:** We have not measured it with the new methodology yet, but you will see us do that for this year. That will be reported in our annual report at the end of the year.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Presumably you are changing your methodology, one would think. If you are not measuring hits per se but you are measuring people, how are you doing –

**Jo de MORTON:** Measuring visits. It is measuring people rather than how many pages they click on while they are there.

**Nick McGOWAN:** In respect to the cost of that entire Know Your Council, who bears the cost of the website, the establishment costs et cetera?

**Jo de MORTON:** That is within the funding for the website team, the Single Digital Presence website team within the Department of Government Services. It is a marginal cost on top of the licences to operate that platform. It is not material.

**Nick McGOWAN:** What budget do you allocate for that team, then?

**Jo de MORTON:** For the Single Digital Presence team?

**John BATHO:** The Single Digital Presence team for the 2023–24 financial year had an allocated appropriations budget of \$5 million.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Say that again.

**John BATHO:** Of \$5 million.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Five million dollars?

**John BATHO:** Yes.

**Jo de MORTON:** So that is staff but mostly the licence costs to run a hundred and something government websites.

**John BATHO:** Yes, it is 120-plus government websites – that is, all the vic.gov.au websites.

**Jo de MORTON:** The domain.

**John BATHO:** Domain websites. So it is a centralised web platform for use across government.

**Jo de MORTON:** So rather than every department needing to fund theirs separately, there is one platform that they can all use, and of course that is much, much cheaper than the duplicated cost of everyone paying those fees.

**Nick McGOWAN:** One would hope so. Mrs McArthur was talking before about the monitors. A monitor has been appointed in Casey, Strathbogie and Whittlesea. That was before the new councillors and councils met. Why is that the case? And in the case of Whittlesea, you had administrators there, so why have they got a monitor and an administrator?

**Lisa GANDOLFO:** I can answer that question. I will go through each of those councils, if that is useful. I think it was Casey, Strathbogie – and I missed the last one, I am sorry.

**Dan HARPER:** Whittlesea.

**Lisa GANDOLFO:** Whittlesea, here we go. In the case of Casey City Council, the monitors have been appointed to guide the council through the return to the democratic representatives and ensure that the council continues to take steps to prevent the recurrence of governance failures that led to the council's dismissal. In the case of Whittlesea, it has been to guide the council through the return, again, to democratic representatives and ensure, again, that we take preventative steps to ensure that the governance failures that led to that council's dismissal will not recur. So each of them has different reasons. In the case of Strathbogie – sorry, not Strathbogie. Whittlesea you asked me about and Strathbogie – it is the same reason as above.

**Nick McGOWAN:** See, that strikes me as odd. You have had an administrator there. You have had the monitor there. They have been doing this for quite some years, plural, and now there is still an ongoing requirement at taxpayer expense.

**Bev McARTHUR:** At ratepayer expense.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Ratepayer expense.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** There are no councillors there.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Notwithstanding we have had this in place for years, and now we are going to keep forking out thousands and thousands of dollars. I just do not understand where this need arises from.

**Michael GALEA:** It is because there have been issues.

**Nick McGOWAN:** They have either fixed the problem or they have not. If they have not fixed it, they have had years to do so, and we are still spending taxpayer dollars like we are a drunken sailor.

**Lisa GANDOLFO:** There was certainly some time to resolve the issues that were there while those councils were under that administration. Now that they are rebuilding with their new councillors, this is a time to smooth out all processes and ensure that it returns to good governance.

**Nick McGOWAN:** It sounds like a monumental abuse of taxpayers money to me.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Ratepayers money.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Well, taxpayers. I will move on.

**Lisa GANDOLFO:** Quite often our councils, and not specifically –

**Bev McARTHUR:** It comes out of the council budget.

**Lisa GANDOLFO:** I was going to add that quite often councils themselves request that monitors return. They find them to be extremely helpful in continuing to rebuild and improve governance practices at the local council. I cannot say it is specifically in these cases –

**Nick McGOWAN:** No.

**Lisa GANDOLFO:** but quite often they do request it.

**Bev McARTHUR:** I can tell you they have not in my area. They have never seen the monitors in Geelong.

**Nick McGOWAN:** On 6 March the government announced, Secretary, the extension of the liquidated builders customer support payment scheme – wow, that is a mouthful. It is to builders that entered liquidation up to 20 February 2024. Can you tell the committee how 20 February was arrived at in terms of the date itself? That is the closing date for the extended scheme.

**Jo de MORTON:** Have you got that information?

**Lisa GANDOLFO:** The liquidated builders information?

**Jo de MORTON:** Yes, the date, about why the 20th – I am just thinking about when the reforms to the legislation came in.

**Lisa GANDOLFO:** I might have some information, but I might need to get back to you before the end of the hearing, potentially. I do not think I have that right at hand.

**Nick McGOWAN:** You can take it on notice, because if we do not come back to it we tend to get cut off by the Chair, so that would be great. Were any queries regarding Apex Homes received by the customer support team prior to 28 February?

**Lisa GANDOLFO:** No, I have not got that level of detail with me.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Perhaps you can come back to us on that.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Take it on notice, to get the wording right.

**Jo de MORTON:** Yes, we can take that on notice.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Was the department aware that Apex Homes had entered liquidation on 28 February?

**Jo de MORTON:** Again, I have not got that at hand. We are just wondering whether that would be our department. Because we administer the scheme that might be a matter for someone else, but we will look into that and take that on notice for you.

**Nick McGOWAN:** I am just trying to understand whether you as the Secretary knew that Apex Homes had entered liquidation on 28 February.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** You should have come here yesterday. DTF were here.

**Nick McGOWAN:** I watched yesterday, remotely. Do not worry. I am well aware of what was said yesterday.

**Lisa GANDOLFO:** We will not have the details of specific cases under that scheme, no.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Were any queries regarding Montego Homes received to the customer support email?

**Jo de MORTON:** Again, we will have to look into that one. I have not got the detail of what the customer support team are answering here with me.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Okay, perhaps you can help me with this, then. Was the minister briefed by your department in respect to the collapse of Montego Homes?

**Jo de MORTON:** That would not be the responsibility of our department. Our department administers the payments for the scheme to the customers.

**Nick McGOWAN:** But you would not have briefed your minister accordingly in respect to the collapse of that operation?

**Michael GALEA:** That is not her responsibility.

**Jo de MORTON:** No, our department is the administrator for the payments to customers. We are not responsible for builders going into liquidation.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Notwithstanding, what I am trying to understand is that you had no advice to the minister in respect to your involvement with that corporation and with their customers?

**Jo de MORTON:** No, we administer the payment. Once government determines eligibility we administer those payments in accordance with eligibility determined by the government, on advice from other departments.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Did you give the minister any recommendation or advice in respect of any proposed extension of the scheme following the collapse of Montego and any of the other liquidated builders that had customers who were ineligible for the scheme?

**Jo de MORTON:** Again, we are the services department, so we administer the payments from government to customers. We do not design the scheme.

**Nick McGOWAN:** The working with children check – I get flooded all the time with complaints by locals that they go to verify their documentation and time and again it says ‘Not an original document’. What are the problems with the software that it does that all the time – frequently? I have experienced this myself. It is incredibly frustrating.

**Jo de MORTON:** I am happy to talk to anyone who has had issues with it –

**Nick McGOWAN:** Yes, that would be me!

**Jo de MORTON:** but the customer satisfaction for that transaction is really high and the success rate getting through the transaction is really high, so I am not sure –

**Nick McGOWAN:** That is hard to believe. Okay, where is the consumer affairs annual report? Not a hard question.

**Jo de MORTON:** Where is it?

**Nick McGOWAN:** Yes.

**Jo de MORTON:** We will ask the director for consumer affairs.

**Nicole RICH:** Mr McGowan, it has been finalised, but there is a certain period of time to table it in Parliament. My understanding is it has not been tabled yet, but it has not been required to be yet. I am sure that it will be imminently.

**Nick McGOWAN:** What is your understanding of when you are supposed to table the report or provide the report to Parliament?

**Nicole RICH:** There are three pieces of legislation under which I am required to produce an annual report, so I have done that again this year, but there is a certain period of time that I have after the end of the financial year to produce the report and actually give it to the minister, and then the minister of course has time to read it before needing to table it in Parliament.

**Nick McGOWAN:** I wish I had this much time to file my own tax matters. How much time do you have? When is the latest possible time you can provide your annual report?

**Nicole RICH:** I could get that information for you. It varies according to the legislation, but the key one is the *Australian Consumer Law and Fair Trading Act*. Essentially, it needs to be tabled roughly within three weeks of sitting dates that are available from when I hand the report to the minister, and I have within six months from the end of the financial year to produce it, but I have already produced the report.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** I may be wrong, but I thought under the *Financial Management Act* it had to be tabled within –

**The CHAIR:** Apologies, Mr O'Brien; you know how much I do not like cutting you off.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** You love it.

**The CHAIR:** We are going to Ms Kathage.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Thank you, Chair, Secretary and officials. Secretary, you mentioned that DGS has had its first full year, which is great – a new department – so well done on that. From your presentation we can see that digital transformation is a big part of the work of the department, and I can see you have got the worker screening unit there. I am not sure if that carries out the work of the child safe checks or if they do other things. Can you let us know: what does that unit actually work on and what are they doing to continue to improve so that we can keep people like Mr McGowan happy with the process for digitised processes?

**Jo de MORTON:** Thanks for the question. Mr Batho is responsible for that area, so I am going to let him speak to it.

**John BATHO:** Thank you for the question. I am happy to talk about the worker screening unit within the Department of Government Services. We have got a worker screening unit in the department, which does two things: one, it conducts the working with children checks and also the NDIS worker screening checks. The screening undertaken by the unit includes reviewing the criminal histories and relevant professional conduct findings of applicants for working with children and NDIS checks and assessing their suitability to engage in risk-related work. The worker screening unit, since moving into DGS, has focused on improving its service delivery through digitisation, making it easier and quicker to apply online and also to store working with



children check cards digitally on the Service Victoria app and mobile wallet and also making it easier to verify the status of workers in real time.

In 2023 the worker screening unit and Service Victoria launched the digital working with children check card, which I just mentioned, giving cardholders the option of putting it as a digital credential in their Service Victoria wallet, and that complements the physical card as well, which still exists. The digital card is a real-time electronic credential. It can be updated, visually inspected and revoked, giving employers and organisations the ability to verify a person's status when requested, which is an important safeguard within the working with children check scheme.

In 2023–24 over 200,000 check holders added their digital card to their Service Victoria wallet. I think, as the Secretary mentioned, there was a high customer approval rating for that transaction, over 98 per cent. As at 30 June 2024 there were approximately 1.8 million working with children check card holders, and all cardholders are subject to continuous monitoring for criminal offending by Victoria Police. The digital card also makes it easier for organisations to check a person's status, as I mentioned, by using the Service Victoria app to scan the QR code, which automatically verifies that that person is holding a valid working with children check card, and of course that also improves the safety of children, having that ability to check the real-time status. The new card is also complemented by a new and improved online application process, which we are hoping is making it easier for people to apply online –

**Jo de MORTON:** I think most people are completing it in under 20 minutes, so we are hoping most people are not having the same experience as you, Mr McGowan.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Yes. I managed to get mine so I could volunteer at my daughter's school fete. It was quite easy to do actually, so I was able to staff the duck-catching stall at the fete to raise money for the school.

**Jo de MORTON:** Cute.

**John BATHO:** As part of that online application process, there is the online identity-checking process, which is a capability offered by Service Victoria. That is a relatively new capability – over the course of a couple of years – and it has progressively increased its success rate. I think seven out of 10 people are now successfully verifying their identity online, which means that people can get their working with children checks processed faster. And it also reduces the burden on the team to do manual identity proofing, which frees them up to focus on those people who either cannot or choose not to transact digitally, so it has benefits for both people who want to engage online but also the people who need the manual assistance.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** The real-time status of workers – I just want to clarify my understanding. Is it the case that previously perhaps someone had a printed card in their wallet with an expiry date on it, that they may have had it revoked but if they still had that card, they could pass as someone who has the right to work with children, whereas the real-time status means that providers of children's services would immediately be able to understand that that person should not work with children?

**John BATHO:** I think it just takes the burden off employers from doing –

**Nick McGOWAN:** You still get sent the card.

**Jo de MORTON:** You still get sent the card at the moment to make sure that it is available. The cards are returned for people where it is revoked.

**Nick McGOWAN:** You should have your card. They would have sent it to you.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** I never check my –

**Nick McGOWAN:** Did you never receive it? You do definitely get a card as well.

**The CHAIR:** Excuse me, Deputy Chair. Secretary.

**Jo de MORTON:** I think the important bit is going forward it is so much easier to be able to check that up and know in real time rather than at the moment where they need to go to a separate website and look it up. Not

everyone would bother taking that extra step, so we just want to make it as frictionless as possible to make sure that those controls are working in the best way that they can.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** I think it is really great. That efficiency that is being gained with, for example, the identity verification online, thinking more generally of Services Vic, we heard yesterday from DEECA about processing of their Victorian energy upgrades program, and they seemed to say that their success in that very much relied on people having success verifying their identities through Service Vic. Is that right?

**John BATHO:** Yes, I think that is right. I am happy to lead off and then throw to you, Secretary. Anything we can do in terms of digitally makes the service (1) more efficient and (2) enables more transactions to be undertaken at marginal cost, because it does not require more people to be employed. Then, as I mentioned before, there will always be a role for people within our organisations to do the manual identity checking, but if we can free up those people to focus on those that really need the assistance to get their identity proofing done, it will be a better service for them as well as a faster service for people that can transact online. I am not sure, Secretary, if you want to add anything to that response.

**Jo de MORTON:** It was great. Thank you.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Do we have a picture then across government of the support and efficiencies you have been able to create for other areas of government? It sounds like it is quite significant.

**John BATHO:** One of the good things about Service Victoria is it offers support to departments and agencies to do the transactions for them, end-to-end digital transactions like the new liquor licence renewals, which can be done on the Service Victoria app. What it can also do is make available bespoke capabilities to make other departments' and agencies' transactions more efficient, and that I think is the DEECA example you are talking to. Service Victoria was able to make available the online identity verification technological tool to DEECA to use in its transactions to get more efficiency through that transaction. You would have seen – I have not got the number right in front of me – but well over 30-plus agencies across government are using Service Victoria's online identity tool.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Closer to home, births, deaths and marriages. I think you have got in your questionnaire some information about improvements that have been made there, which have resulted in – I have not got that one in front of me. Can you talk us through what sort of uplift has happened? I think you have applied your digital lens to BDM.

**John BATHO:** Yes, I am really happy to talk about the work that has happened since this committee met this time last year. I know it was a subject of conversation, the need to uplift the service levels in the Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages. I am really proud that significant improvements have been able to be made by the department and in particular the staff within the Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages. We have managed to reduce contact centre wait times from I think it was 4½ hours last year down to under a minute now for people that are calling the BDM contact centre. We have also managed to get all the certificate turnaround times and birth registration times within target timeframes, which are published on the website. I think we have four-week turnaround times for certificates, but in reality we are managing to get certificates out to people within four days now, on average. So I am really hoping that the community is starting to see the uplift in BDM service levels and they can reach people when they need them.

**Jo de MORTON:** I think a lot of people needed support from BDM in more urgent timeframes. Something was happening in their life where they needed something really quickly. The lack of certainty about how long those processes would take I think was the thing we heard from customers that was most distressing to them. It was prompting people to spend hours waiting on the phone just to know 'When am I going to get my certificate?' The fact that those services are now really consistently inside those target ranges has just taken a lot of that distress away from people, and they can have confidence that they know how to plan for what they need to plan for. That is a service that is so fundamental and happens at times in people's lives that are quite emotional, good or bad, so that was really important.

**John BATHO:** I think with the departments we have tried not just to focus on one solution or one intervention to fix the problem. We have focused on a whole suite of reforms with the team – everything from getting a temporary surge workforce to help get through the backlog that we had late last year but also other things like getting more people, as I mentioned before, to use Service Victoria's online identity verification,

which freed up our contact centre staff and teams within BDM to help those who needed extra support or case management support to get their certificates or anything else that they needed from the registry. We have also had a concerted effort on the technology as well behind BDM, making sure that all their technology platforms were stable and fit for purpose in supporting the frontline workers, and we have done a lot of remediation over the last six months or so to get the service functioning.

**Jo de MORTON:** And that integrated call centre has been really important to bring consistent processes into call answering and allowing for extended hours. Now it is open from 8 until 4 pm rather than just until 2 pm, so hopefully we will expand that even more in the future, but giving people that extra time to get support is really good as well.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Thank you. And with all these improvements that have been made, has there been an opportunity for you to share learnings with the federal government about ways to create efficiencies in government services?

**Nick McGOWAN:** Hang on, it has only been a year. You do not want to lecture the federal government too quickly.

**The CHAIR:** Excuse me, Deputy Chair.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Lecture them a year after it has been diabolical, almost comical.

**The CHAIR:** It is not an introduction for you to have a conversation.

**Nick McGOWAN:** A year after it has been diabolical.

**Jo de MORTON:** We do participate in the national forums, things like the data and digital ministers' meeting and the working groups associated with that, so there is a lot of conversation between senior officials about technology improvements and opportunities.

I cannot let the opportunity go without making a little plug for our commemorative birth certificates as well. They are just such a lovely –

**Lauren KATHAGE:** I have got the birds. They are beautiful. Yes, I love them.

**Jo de MORTON:** Have you? Yes. There are some really beautiful designs by local Victorian artists and there are some Indigenous female artists' designs, like Vicki Couzens, Lee Durroch and Treahna Hamm that are just really lovely, so I just wanted to give that a plug while I had the opportunity.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** I will keep it in mind.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much. We will go straight to Mr O'Brien.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Thank you, Chair. Secretary, I might actually continue on births, deaths and marriages, if I may. It has been a hobby horse of mine for a number of years now. I note on the website that we have done away with the ticks and crosses for what is open and how you can contact them and we have just done away with being able to go to the births, deaths and marriages main office at all. Is that ever going to reopen or not?

**Jo de MORTON:** I think the neighbourhood justice centres are servicing that demand at the moment, and I think you have heard that if you can get your certificate within four days and you get your call answered within one minute, there is hopefully not a lot of need to make people go to all that travel time to come into the city and get a certificate like they used to have to in the past.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** That does not answer the question. It is not open and will not be opened?

**Jo de MORTON:** At the moment there are no plans to open it because there is a neighbourhood justice centre available for people to go to to access those services.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** How many of those are there?

**Jo de MORTON:** Twenty-one.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Twenty-one, right around the state? Yes. You are saying to get a certificate within four days, but your presentation says that certificates are assessed within four days. That is not the same thing as getting a certificate.

**Jo de MORTON:** No, that is a good point. I think we have stopped short of guaranteeing Australia Post delivery times, so it is normally within a day or two after that.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** I wonder whether we are at cross-purposes, because the processing times on the BDM website advise that a certificate up to 14 days – two weeks. Birth registration and certificate for newborns up to 28 days – four weeks.

**Jo de MORTON:** They are the longest times. They are not the current average performance. The performance is quicker than the website, but we want customers to be really certain that that is the longest period that they would have to wait for and then most of the time they are getting them much quicker than those periods of time.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Okay. On the BDM website there is a list of processing times up to, as you say, presumably the top end for all of those types of applications – death registration, marriage registration, relationship registration, change of name et cetera. Could I ask, on notice, for the 2023–24 actual processing times, on average, for those?

**Jo de MORTON:** 2023–24 actuals, on average – yes.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** You keep that data, presumably? You must if you are saying that it is four days now.

**Jo de MORTON:** Yes, we do. Obviously the times have improved over the year. We have talked about them coming down significantly since the beginning of the year.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** I would welcome for the 2023–24 financial year and what it currently is at, if you have got that.

**Jo de MORTON:** Yes, we would be happy – have you got that information at hand?

**John BATHO:** I could talk you through some of the turnaround times in October 2024, most recently, or I can –

**Danny O'BRIEN:** I would rather get the lot, if I could. Yes, October would be fine for an update.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Is that on notice?

**Jo de MORTON:** Yes, we are happy, Ms McArthur, to have that on notice. Thank you.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Did you want to ask that question?

**Bev McARTHUR:** Yes. Staying on the births, deaths and marriages registry, given that anyone can now change their birth certificate every 12 months with a stat dec from a mate who has known the suspect for 12 months, can you tell us how many Victorian citizens have changed from female to male, from male to female or non-binary?

**Jo de MORTON:** We do not have that information to hand.

**John BATHO:** I do not have that information.

**Bev McARTHUR:** You do not keep that information? You do not accumulate it?

**John BATHO:** It is kept by the registry, but I do not have that information.

**Bev McARTHUR:** I am happy to take it on notice if you could provide it to us, please.

**John BATHO:** Let me take that on notice –

**Jo de MORTON:** Do we have it?

**John BATHO:** and see what we can provide. Yes.

**Bev McARTHUR:** It is very relevant to births, deaths and marriages, because we have changed how we can use the register. Thank you very much.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Can I continue on, at page 58 of the questionnaire the output cost for identity and worker screening services is provided. The target figure was \$28.1 million, but it has been exceeded by over \$27 million. It says it is due to machinery-of-government changes. What machinery-of-government changes led to the budgeted output costs virtually doubling?

**Jo de MORTON:** You will notice there is also a corresponding decrease in the services to government output. What happened when additional machinery funds were transferred from the Department of Justice and Community Safety was they were transferred and landed in the services to government output. They should not have been. They should have been in the identity and worker screening output. That movement occurred. It was just a shifting of funds between those outputs as a result of a cleaning up after the machinery changes.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** I am totally confused. Sorry, the output costs for the worker screening services got money that it should not have got. Is that what you are saying?

**Jo de MORTON:** When the finance teams classify transfers between departments, they classify them in a particular way, and now I am getting into deeper accounting than I will be able to speak to here. But the way it got classified was as a service to government because it had come from another department. Now, that was not right. It belonged in the identity and worker screening output, so it has been moved. That is just a net shift between the two outputs.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** But it is still \$27 million more than was budgeted for. That is what I am trying to get at. You seem to be saying that more money should have gone there, to the worker screening output.

**John BATHO:** If you do not mind, Secretary, I think it was budgeted for, but in the incorrect output so you did not see the number aggregated together. So now the number is aggregated together, once we move the money from output A into the output B –

**Jo de MORTON:** It was budget that was in the other output.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Okay. Perhaps getting to the nub of the point, how many identity checks were performed in the 2023–24 financial year?

**John BATHO:** I do have that information.

**Jo de MORTON:** How many identity checks or worker screening checks?

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Is there a difference?

**Jo de MORTON:** Yes. Service Victoria verifies identity, and they verified 1.3 million identities in 2023–24. Not all of those were for worker screenings. They also do the national disability insurance scheme, they do a raft – I think Mr Batho mentioned before about capabilities provided to others. They do identity proofing for WorkSafe, for example.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** So 1.3 million in total?

**Jo de MORTON:** In total, across –

**Danny O'BRIEN:** How many were worker screenings?

**Jo de MORTON:** There were about 500,000 worker screenings.

**John BATHO:** Yes, there were 577,000 working with children checks and NDIS worker screenings, so each of those would have had an identity check.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Right.

**Jo de MORTON:** It is not a direct correlation though, because some of those might have been offline. Not all of them would have been on Service Victoria, so it is not quite apples with apples.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Yes. Was that considerably more than was expected?

**Jo de MORTON:** Yes.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** I think actually the target was 420 –

**John BATHO:** Yes, it was a 37 per cent increase.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Why did the department underestimate how many there would be? Or what is the reason for the massive over-request?

**John BATHO:** Some of it is growth in NDIS worker screening checks.

**Jo de MORTON:** I think we are seeing a growth in the care economy more generally, and it has driven an increase in demand in those screening checks.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** That has not just happened in the last year; that is something that could have been anticipated.

**Jo de MORTON:** I think the magnitude of it – 37 per cent is a lot bigger than we would have anticipated. So yes, perhaps we could have done a bit better, but that was quite large. I do not think we would have quite gone that high with our estimate.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** I do not have this year's target, but the target has been 380,000 to 420,000 in the last couple of years. Did it increase in this year's budget as a result?

**John BATHO:** I have not got this year's budget in front of me –

**Danny O'BRIEN:** I have it right behind me, but I do not have time to look at right now.

**John BATHO:** I can pull it up.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** We might come back to that. Can I ask about rental bonds, Secretary? The Residential Tenancies Bond Authority missed its target for transactions undertaken. Why was that? Sorry, that is on page 57 of the questionnaire.

**Jo de MORTON:** That is really driven by demand. There was less demand for rental property transactions.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** So how is the target set? Is it based on a historical average?

**Lisa GANDOLFO:** It is based on historical numbers.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Does the department get any advice or direction from other agencies – central agencies in particular – to help it set that target, given the state of the market and the like?

**Nicole RICH:** Mr O'Brien, essentially we set the target through forecasting what we think that the demand is going to be. We know that, for example, more people go out into the market and there are a lot of bond transactions around December–January, so we take that into account. I think you have noted that we obviously got the forecast a little bit out for the year. It is still within 5 per cent, but yes, I appreciate it was a bit lower. I think that for this year's budget – we will come and have a chat about it next year – I hope we forecast it more accurately. But ultimately it is driven by what is happening in the market.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** I guess the concern more broadly is that the lodgement of bond authorities is a proxy for the amount of rentals in the market, and if it is dropping, than that is a concern not necessarily for your department but more broadly. To that extent, Secretary, does the department play any policy role in advising either DPC or Treasury on the level of bond lodgements?

**Jo de MORTON:** No, I do not believe so. Do we?

**Nicole RICH:** I think you are right, Mr O'Brien, it is an important number to be keeping track of. It is certainly an important indicator of what is going on in the market. I do not think we necessarily need to specifically provide specific advice on that number. It is a clearly available public number – it is clearly reported and taken into account.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** I am just looking for an answer to the question. Do you provide policy advice on that or not? Is it just an administrative function?

**Jo de MORTON:** It is, yes, administrative.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** What is the number of active rental bonds lodged with the RTBA? Do you have that figure for 2023–24?

**Nicole RICH:** Yes, I will get it to you in a moment, while you are asking another question.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Sorry?

**Nicole RICH:** Yes. It was probably published, but I will get it out in a second.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Okay. I'm looking to see how it compares with last year. I am sure this is known but, firstly, the question is: what is the value of the bonds held at any given time?

**Nicole RICH:** I will get that at the same time. Okay, so for 30 June, bonds held was 732,125. The value of the bonds held on 30 June was \$1.46 billion.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** \$1.46 billion.

**Nicole RICH:** That is billion, thank you.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Yes. That is 30 June 2024?

**Nicole RICH:** That is correct.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** 30 June 2023 – do you have that in front of you?

**Nicole RICH:** Yes. Do you want both numbers?

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Yes, please.

**Nicole RICH:** Okay. It is published in the RTBA annual report, but at 30 June 2023 it was 738,414 bonds held and \$1.38 billion was the value held.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** So the number has gone down, but the value has gone up?

**Nicole RICH:** That is correct.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Which would be consistent with less rentals at a higher value?

**Nicole RICH:** Yes.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Yes. My personal question really, but does the department earn interest on those bonds?

**Jo de MORTON:** Yes, the trust funds earn interest on those bonds.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** And is that then used for cost recovery, or what happens to the interest?

**Jo de MORTON:** It is used for a specific trust –

**Nicole RICH:** So there is a legislative framework for how that works, Mr O'Brien. There are actually two statutory accounts established under the *Residential Tenancies Act 1997*. The first account is the residential

bonds account. It is purely allowed to hold the bonds, so it is a third-party funds account. We do invest the bonds, but they are in conservative investments for obvious reasons – it is third-party funds, so we need to be careful. But it is also important that we generate some return for the taxpayer from holding the bonds. Any income we earn on the holding and the investment of the bonds must be paid into the second statutory account, which is called the residential bonds investment income account. That account is used to pay for the operating costs of the bond authority and then to pay for the cost of administering the Act more broadly.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Ms Rich. We are going to go to Mr Tak.

**Meng Heang TAK:** Thank you, Chair, secretaries and officials. I will come back to Ms Rich just a little bit later, but I am still interested in Service Victoria and digitising government services. I refer to budget paper 2023–24, to the Service Victoria mobile app as a tool to support Victorians and businesses to access information and government services online. It feels like new services are always being added to the platform. Secretary, can you talk to us about the new services that are available on the app and how they are making it easier for Victorians to engage with government?

**Jo de MORTON:** Thank you so much for the question. Service Victoria continues to cement itself as that front door for government. You are right, there is access to many more services now, around 170 services from across government, and the websites are very popular – 29.4 million visitors to the website and the app over last year, so that is a lot of usage. I think why people are coming in such big numbers is for the useful tools and portals that Service Victoria now does. This year they have added, for example, World Password Day tools, like launching the new password safety tools where you can check your password and it gives you tips for how to create a stronger one. There is also suggesting stronger pass phrases and unique and random ones. There was a cyber safety check, which I did. I like to think I kind of know about these things, but I only scored 80 per cent, so I learned a lot from our new cyber tool. Everyone who has not, I suggest you hop on and have a bit of a go.

The other thing was the renting and buying portal, which I mentioned earlier, and that has got a heap of helpful information for people who are renters or for landlords wanting to know their obligations. I think it is those kinds of products and services that have driven a lot of the use of the Service Victoria website and app this year. They are a great addition to existing things, like the savings finder continues to be popular. People always like to know where they can get a bit of a discount, and there are some available right across government. And the push notifications have been really an effective way of helping people to know what information is available. The app sent 28.9 notifications last year – really demonstrable success. There was a whole range of initiatives, like sick pay guarantee and the 10-cent container deposit scheme, that people may not have known were available to them, and they could just click on that and find out a lot more.

The other feature they have added that customers really responded to is the mobile app wallet, so storing all of your government credentials in one place is continuing to be something that people are keen to have. I mentioned before that we have the most digital credentials of any jurisdiction; we will keep adding more all the time. You can get your working with children check, your fishing licences, your veterans card, your seniors card. And of course we have also got the digital drivers licence, so now you can carry it on your phone. And people can get their learners permit and their probationary licences too, which were just brand new and I think, unless someone tells me differently, have been going well today. Yes, all right, luckily.

I think, though, for most customers we know being able to transact end to end is really important. It is convenient, it saves people time and it is important for businesses too. For example, Service Victoria added new transactions for pubs, clubs and other venues so that they can now apply for general liquor licences via Service Victoria and also renew their liquor licence. The online renewals have reduced the time for a business to renew their liquor licence from 25 minutes down to about a minute, which is a really good time saving for business, and they are in the process of digitising the remaining manual paper-based liquor licence transactions. In the meantime businesses can access all their services in one place via the mobile app.

From the outset Service Victoria focused on removing those roadblocks to fully online services by focusing on the capability components that we mentioned earlier. We talked about online identity proofing, and I mentioned that there were 1.3 million times that identities were proved this year, but there are also things like the payments gateway and accounts, and all those other capabilities are available for departments to utilise instead of having to build their own and pay the ongoing operating costs for their own. That online identify proofing I think is a key part of why Victoria is still the only jurisdiction to be able to offer the worker screening checks end to end



online for customers who prefer that, and in total there were 61 new digital products, services and features added by Service Victoria over the year. I am really proud that the customer is still the centre of everything that Service Victoria is doing. They have managed to maintain their customer satisfaction at above 95 percent, and 'easy' is still the most common word that customers use in their verbatim feedback on the app.

**Meng Heang TAK:** Thank you. I would like to move on to the Underquoting Taskforce. It was good to see your team out about in Clayton South not long ago on that beautiful day with the minister. Secretary, housing affordability is a huge issue in Victoria, like we all know, and I would also like to draw your attention to page 60 of the provided questionnaire which also referred to the performance of Consumer Affairs Victoria's Underquoting Taskforce. Can you provide an update to the committee on the activities of the Underquoting Taskforce?

**Jo de MORTON:** We have got our regulator right here, so are you happy to speak to that?

**Nicole RICH:** Yes, I am, Secretary. Thank you for the question as well, Mr Tak. We are proud of the efforts of the taskforce in the last year. So obviously the taskforce was set up and embedded within the regulator, Consumer Affairs Victoria, to target unfair practices in the property market, particularly underquoting, and I guess its goal is to ensure that property prices are being advertised fairly and honestly, and we are protecting buyers time and money. We know how frustrating it is for buyers when they are wasting time and money on looking at properties where they are clearly advertised below where they are going to sell. Through the taskforce we have taken what we are clearly saying is a zero-tolerance posture on underquoting, which means that if we detect a breach there will be a regulatory response to it. So we have increased monitoring of property sales campaigns through the taskforce. We have improved the way we collect and monitor market intelligence and data, including complaints from the public, which are a really important source of intelligence, then we focus and target the inspections that we conduct based on that intelligence. When we do inspections, particularly targeted inspections, we do have powers to seize documents and data as well to ensure compliance, and we do use those where we need to.

The sorts of enforcement options that are available to Consumer Affairs Victoria range from official warnings to infringement notices or fines to civil penalties and criminal court proceedings. We can also take disciplinary action against estate agents where you can seek suspension or loss of a licence. As I said, because of the zero-tolerance approach all of the instances of detected breaches result in a response. So for the 2023–24 financial year we ultimately monitored a bit over 1500 sales campaigns. We monitored 1547 sales campaigns, and we issued 89 infringements and 128 official warnings. The infringements themselves totalled just over a million dollars in fines; that was the value of the infringements. I think it is fair to say that we do have a compliance and enforcement focus, but we are also aware that it is important that we are continuing to engage with the industry itself and the professionals on what their responsibilities are and that we are educating. So we do have a focus on supporting agents to understand and be able to comply with the law. We are not here for punishment for punishment's sake; we want people to do the right thing and for buyers to have a good experience in the marketplace, so we have been doing that broader engagement and also community awareness as a focus.

During the financial year that we are talking about today we ran a three-month digital communications campaign where we were highlighting that underquoting is illegal. We were encouraging people to report and encouraging estate agents to look at their obligations more closely. We know that that campaign was seen over 7 million times, which is a pretty good reach. Obviously, more recently, in the new financial year, it has been announced that the underquoting taskforce is now being made permanent at Consumer Affairs Victoria as well.

**Meng Heang TAK:** Thank you. With the underquoting taskforce and also to do with rentals – in relation to the renting taskforce, I note that on page 60 of the questionnaire it was stated that compliance activity, which you have already touched on, was supported by a communication campaign that ran informational posts that were seen over 7 million times. Can you expand on this and how this work interacted with the underquoting taskforce enforcement work?

**Nicole RICH:** Yes, sure. Mr Tak, are you asking specifically about the renting taskforce now rather than the underquoting taskforce?

**Meng Heang TAK:** The renting taskforce.

**Nicole RICH:** We have modelled the renting taskforce approach quite a lot on the underquoting taskforce. It is not identical, but it is modelled quite a lot on the approach, particularly the intelligence-led components, so that we can focus our activities, and also things like the communications campaign. We did run a communications campaign in the lead-up to field operations for the renting taskforce. We learned from the underquoting taskforce approach that a communications campaign can be really successful. I think it was even more successful in the case of the renting taskforce. For the underquoting campaign I said that we had about 7 million people see the campaign. We ran a communications campaign statewide for the rental minimum standards, so we were really flagging to the community, again, that there was going to be a zero-tolerance approach to detected breaches under the *Residential Tenancies Act*, but we did want to give time for rental providers and agents to really understand their obligations and get systems and processes in place to comply. We ran a digital campaign from April to June this year. It reached over 17 million people, which probably also reflects the stronger community interest currently, with the rental market conditions, in this issue. A lot of people saw the campaign, and we were encouraging people to understand what the rental minimum standards are and what their rights and obligations are under that. The renting taskforce was only announced in March, so we spent the last quarter of the financial year really running the campaign and getting the taskforce established, but there has been more activity, obviously, in the months since then.

**Meng Heang TAK:** Thank you. For the time remaining, in Clarinda, my electorate, in Clayton and Clayton South about 60 per cent of people are renters and it is one of the most diverse communities. Can you tell us a little bit more about how you engage with those communities?

**Nicole RICH:** Of course. Thank you. I appreciate your interest. As you know, we did do a blitz in the Clayton area more recently. Obviously, that is in the current financial year. That was sort of reflective of the intelligence-driven approach of the taskforce, which I mentioned earlier. We obviously look at where there is a high proportion of rental properties. We also look at the characteristics of the housing market in certain areas and also what complaints are being made to us about advertised rental properties, and all of that intelligence is synthesised to help determine where we are going to target our efforts. Clayton has a high proportion of rental properties, as you know, and there are certainly community groups in the area that are probably more vulnerable to poor practices, so we thought it was important that we get out into the area and attend weekend open for inspections. For the communications campaign that I was talking about earlier, we did have that translated into key community languages as well so that we could make sure that translated information was put out, not just for renters but for rental providers as well who might be renting their own property out.

**Meng Heang TAK:** Thank you. Thank you, Secretary. Thank you, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Ms Rich. We are going to go to Mr Puglielli.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon. It costs \$140.40 to change your sex on your birth certificate in Victoria. How much total revenue are births, deaths and marriages making from that particular fee?

**Jo de MORTON:** The appropriation of births, deaths and marriages does not come in quite that same way. All of the revenue collected from the statutory fees gets paid into consolidated revenue. Every year government allocates the budget allocation to births, deaths and marriages for their operational expenses. It is not a one-to-one relationship between a particular fee and the appropriation for the administration of the unit.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Okay. Just to make sure I have understood – because that is going into consolidated revenue, you cannot report to us the total revenue that would be coming in from that particular charge.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Surely you would know.

**Jo de MORTON:** Yes. Sorry. I thought you were asking a different question about how much of that charge does BDM receive. You mean what is the total amount that government receives from the change of name?

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** What is the total revenue coming in from that charge?

**Jo de MORTON:** We would be able to add that up with the other question that we took, which was how many –

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Same question, different way of asking.

**Jo de MORTON:** Same question, different way of asking, yes.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you. I would put to the committee: people should not be restricted from being recognised for who they are because of financial reasons, and the stats tell us that trans and gender-diverse people are disproportionately living in low-income conditions in the community. So I ask: has births, deaths and marriages considered either lowering the fee, expanding the criteria for fee waiver eligibility or getting rid of the fee altogether?

**John BATHO:** I am happy to provide the committee with more information about the fee waiver policy and the types of criteria that BDM takes into consideration. It is something that it does turn its mind to because it does not want people to be unfairly discriminated against if they cannot afford the fee. I am happy to provide you with more information about the current fee waiver policy.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** That is extremely welcome, but the question is more so: has BDM itself considered, or the department, for that matter, considered, lowering the fee or changing those criteria or just getting rid of the fee altogether? That is the crux of my question. Has that consideration occurred?

**Jo de MORTON:** The statutory fee is set through the regulatory impact statement process, and then case by case births, deaths and marriages can apply their fee waiver policy. Any consideration of lowering the fee globally would come out of a future regulatory impact statement process, but anyone who has a particular case they would like to put forward can do so through that process into births, deaths and marriages on a case-by-case basis.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Is that process instigated by government? Is that how that works?

**Jo de MORTON:** The individual one or the RIS? Which process?

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Just so I have heard you correctly, the statement that you are talking about –

**Jo de MORTON:** Yes, the regulatory impact statement.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Where does that occur? How does that happen?

**Jo de MORTON:** That is a government process that happens on the sunseting of the regulations.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** So it is a matter for government to potentially get rid of this fee. That is where that would come from.

**Jo de MORTON:** Yes.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you. I am still new to the Parliament, so getting through all of this. With reference to the fee waiver policy and people applying for a fee waiver in relation to that charge that I was talking about for Victorians to change the sex on their birth certificates, we have previously asked the minister to provide the total number of applications and of these applications how many were approved. We have since been told that it is not possible to disaggregate based on application type. From the department's perspective, is that true? Does BDM not record that information?

**Jo de MORTON:** That would be where that advice has come from, so that would have come from the registrar in response.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** So the total number of applications is not recorded?

**Jo de MORTON:** Sorry. I am misunderstanding you. So I thought you said –

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** The total number of applications for a fee waiver – is that recorded by BDM?

**Jo de MORTON:** Yes.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Could that be provided to the committee?

**Jo de MORTON:** Yes.

**John BATHO:** I think we can talk to the registrar and work out what can be provided to the committee, yes.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Terrific. Of that number, how many were approved? If we could know that as well, that would be great.

**John BATHO:** We can take that away.

**Jo de MORTON:** I think we can have a look at what is there. I think we should be able to provide that.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** With the fee waiver policy itself, does that include postage paid to receive the document at the end?

**Jo de MORTON:** We will have to come back to you on that.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** That is all right. Good to get that clarified. Could I ask – and this might also be on notice – for the last three financial years the total number of applications for a fee waiver in relation to applications to change one's sex on one's birth certificate, and of those figures, the total number of fee waivers that were granted? That is effectively a similar question.

**Jo de MORTON:** That was the bit of your question I was uncertain about, whether we can disaggregate or whether we have only got the total fee waivers, not by type. We will find out what we have got and make that available.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Fantastic. Thank you. Staying on births, deaths and marriages, what advice has been given to the government or to the minister relating to the proposed privatisation of births, deaths and marriages?

**Jo de MORTON:** That is not a matter for our department.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** No advice has been given from the department relating to that?

**Jo de MORTON:** No.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Where would that be given?

**Jo de MORTON:** Treasury and Finance.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Treasury and Finance, good to know. Do you know how much money the government would have made if that sale had occurred?

**Jo de MORTON:** It is not a matter for our department.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Good to know. In terms of the delivery of services at births, deaths and marriages, if it were privatised, is there a view as to how much services would cost to Victorians?

**Jo de MORTON:** Not something our department advised on.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Overseeing delivery of the services, would you expect them to be more expensive under a privatised model?

**Jo de MORTON:** I mean that really depends on the contracting arrangements that government might enter into, for example, on the VicRoads partnership, the fees have been maintained. So all of those things are considered as part of any future arrangements, but I think you have seen government has ruled that out now, so it did not progress that far.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Okay. I then think some of my other questions will be for that same department, so I might move forward. You mentioned in your presentation about the safe and responsible use of generative AI and deploying AI in a safe and ethical way in relation to the provision of government services. In the view of the department, what is safe and what is ethical?

**Jo de MORTON:** Great question.

**John BATHO:** I am happy to respond to that if you do not mind, Secretary, with maybe just a bit of context setting about how you define safe and ethical. At the national stage, through the data and digital ministers meeting all Australian jurisdictions have signed up to an AI assurance framework, which is based on eight ethical principles, which has been developed out of the Commonwealth. So that very much sets the baseline about what governments have signed up to collectively around the use of AI, everything from transparency, integrity to explainability. So now that that has been agreed nationally, we are using that as a basis to set up our own internal Victorian government assurance framework which will be a tool for anyone across the Victorian government who is looking to use and deploy AI; they have got a tool to assess those ethical considerations and how the tool is used.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you. How does the department intend to engage with image generation in a safe and ethical way?

**John BATHO:** I think maybe just taking a step back about how AI is being considered in a Victorian government context, one aspect of it is: how are public servants engaging with publicly available generative AI tools, like the ones you can get online outside of the Victorian government domain and tenancy. We are looking at how you can make sure that people are not putting confidential information into those publicly available tools, so that is one aspect of the safe use which we are looking at. Then I think this is more to your question around how government is going to be using particular tools, that is where I think the ethical considerations come in, and the AI assurance framework. But all my comments, I should just say, are in the context of the Victorian government and the Department of Government Services role, and very much looking at how the Victorian government is using AI. We are not taking a broader focus on how AI might be regulated more broadly in the economy; that is something more the Commonwealth government is looking at the moment.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** I suppose a query – is the department intending on using generative AI for image generation purposes? Is that something you are aware of?

**John BATHO:** I think we are at the early stage of looking at what the different use cases of AI are within government. When we understand what those use cases are, then there will be a methodical process to pilot them, run through the ethical considerations and also look at the technological implications and the cost implications of those tools. So we are seeing that all of that will come together across all the different use cases of AI, and then we can make decisions about the safe and responsible use of AI.

**Jo de MORTON:** I was just going to say that at the moment at this early stage it does not seem to be one of the areas that most departments are wanting to explore. It is more the text generation and word-based responses that seem to be the more common interest areas just at this stage. But I think as these tools get a bit better developed, certainly what we want to make sure of is that if there are potential constructive uses for them, we work out how to do that in a really safe way.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you, I might just move on to the underquoting taskforce we were just covering earlier. Just a quick follow-up: what is the average penalty that has been issued in dollars?

**Nicole RICH:** Well, the penalty is set under the regulations, so it will depend on the infringement. The key offences under the *Estate Agents Act* attract a maximum court penalty of around \$11,800 for individuals and a bit over \$59,000 for companies. It is indexed every year, but the infringement amount that is set is around a bit over \$2000 for individuals and \$11,800 for companies. So most of the fines, when they are issued to estate agencies, they are businesses, they are companies, so they are essentially going to get the \$11,800 fine. It is a little bit more than that, but it is essentially that one.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Is it the view of the department that that penalty amount is sufficient to deter dodgy behaviour?

**Nicole RICH:** It is actually a really good question. Under the housing statement the government has already committed to increasing the penalties under the Act to create some more serious penalties for various conduct offences under the Act. That will include the underquoting offences, so I guess that is an acknowledgement that there is room to increase the penalties. That said, from our experience and my experience running the taskforce for two years now, I do believe that they actually are significant penalties. I know there is often a lot of

discussion about whether they are a deterrent. My firm belief from our experience is that they are a deterrent. There is no question in my mind that estate agencies do not like being fined, and that they are a significant financial hit. So I do believe that they are acting as a deterrent and helping to change behaviour.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you. I might just move on to VicFleet and to whoever can take that one. How many electric vehicles are in the fleet at the moment?

**Gayle PORTHOUSE:** There are currently 501 from memory, up from the 400 that we were funded to put in place with the compatible infrastructure to charge them, which was the project pilot that was run. I am pretty sure, as of yesterday, it is around 501.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** 501, thank you. It would be good to get an idea of what percentage of the overall fleet is now electric.

**Gayle PORTHOUSE:** It is not a gigantic percentage of the overall fleet. Let me tell you what the numbers are, of the fleet itself.

**Jo de MORTON:** While Gayle is finding that, it is a small percentage to begin with. As you know we have only just started the electrification process, but government has a commitment for electrification by 2035 and so between now and then we will be increasing that percentage. So it is early days at the moment.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Even though it is early days, do you think the government is on track to meet that target?

**Jo de MORTON:** At the moment we have a plan that would see us meet that target, so yes. But it is not without some uncertainty around availability and other such factors, but for the time being we have a plan that looks achievable.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. We will go straight to Mr Hilakari.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** I actually just could not hear what you said then. Is it 100 percent by 2035?

**Jo de MORTON:** Yes.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** And what is the total number of the fleet at the moment?

**Gayle PORTHOUSE:** It is about 6000, I think.

**Jo de MORTON:** Yes, I am not sure. The number of electric vehicles is 501. The total fleet – we are just scuffling looking for that number for you. It is a very ambitious pathway, but we do have a staged plan that aspirationally would see us meet that target. It feels achievable at the moment.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** And are we installing the infrastructure to support those cars at government sites, or what does the rollout look like for that?

**Jo de MORTON:** We have installed 400 charging stations across government sites, yes. We will have a look at what is going on in the marketplace for a minute and see whether any more are required.

**Gayle PORTHOUSE:** There are 400 that were part of that pilot program. There are more certainly in regional areas and through DEECA and others sort of buying that infrastructure in to their locations as well. As Jo said, there is the opportunity for us to use service stations – and I think even my local supermarket has now got four of them out the front of it. As that comes on board there is a lot more interest from people to be purchasing the electric vehicles.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** I look forward to those numbers of total cars. Is that total cars across all of government or is that total cars off specific parts of government?

**Gayle PORTHOUSE:** It is total cars across all of government. It will not include things like all hospitals and things like that.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Of course. Thank you. I might move to libraries, if that is okay. I think the earlier evidence was that the 1970s was the last time it was 50–50 for a couple of years then.

**Dan HARPER:** It was for two years in the early 1970s.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Great, thank you. It is good to see that we have run back and forth, history and the future, through these presentations. I really appreciated your presentation of the \$51.4 million, and I actually thank the department for going out there and being advocates for libraries. It is a really important thing, and I am glad to see departments saying, 'Actually this is a great place to support more funding.' I can understand why 50–50 is not always the case, because the local library in my community that the government supported in refurbishing actually includes all these things that libraries never used to do. They have got a science, tech, engineering, arts and maths focus, something that in the 1970s when it was 50–50 funded did not exist. The local council also runs their community services through there, so you can pay your rates and do all these other things, so it is no longer just a library; it is so much more.

I am just hoping you can outline some of the ways that other libraries across the state are using the funding from the Victorian government and the sorts of services that they offer beyond just borrowing a book like we did in 1970.

**Jo de MORTON:** Yes. Thank you. Great question. And just before I answer it, I have found the figure. It is just over 15,000 vehicles in the fleet.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Fantastic.

**Jo de MORTON:** Back to libraries: the changing shape of library services is something that is really, really important, I think, and that continued popularity of libraries. Despite the transition to digital, they are still really, really engaging for those local communities. What was fascinating was there were over 12 million visits to library websites and mobile apps, and they were accessed over 4 million times. They are huge numbers of people really embracing a very different way to think about a library service, and the interaction when customers get to those sites, from what we have collected from local government, is really high as well. There have been over 10 million downloads of digital resources. As an example, the Geelong Regional Library Corporation, which Mrs McArthur would be interested in, reported more than 400,000 digital loans on BorrowBox, which is one of the highest usage rates of any library service in Victoria, so that is huge.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** For someone like me who does not use BorrowBox, tell me what BorrowBox is.

**Jo de MORTON:** They are accessing e-newspapers and e-magazines on the platform. That has been a really big increase – I think an almost 60 per cent increase in usage of those. The other thing they will be doing on there is accessing ebooks, and audiobooks are really popular now as well. If anyone has got a long commute, I can highly recommend the audiobooks.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Yes. Great.

**Jo de MORTON:** I think Geelong has 3300 titles in their library, so there is a massive amount to choose from, and that is growing in use as well. Also for people who are a bit nervous about using technology, libraries are there to help support you to do it, and for people who do not have access as well – we were talking about people who might not be able to afford some of the devices – there were 36,000 loans of digital devices, so not only can you access the digital material but you can loan a device to play it on or watch it on, which is really great.

As I mentioned before, we have not really captured that use in our BP3 measures, and we are working with Public Libraries Victoria to understand that a bit better and work out what is the right way that we can help people understand the modern and innovative uses of library services and really better reflect those in the way that we talk about libraries' performance.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** I might just move to libraries as community hubs. I know this committee, in one of our other processes, saw them as really great in the Libraries After Dark program. In the local library near me they actually do the Friday prayers for the Islamic community, which is a really great use of the library space and the meeting rooms attached to it. But I would be keen to understand how you perceive it and how the community has been using libraries in your broader view than my narrow view of the local community I represent –

**Jo de MORTON:** No, that is really fascinating.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** including for natural disasters and other important times in people's lives.

**Jo de MORTON:** Yes, definitely. I think we have touched on a few, haven't we – so definitely natural disasters and I think all the e-resources we have talked about. Also libraries have wi-fi, and that is really important for some people. I have heard stories of people at local libraries where they watch the kids hang out out the front of the library because they can get on the wi-fi and have access –

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Is that after hours, do you mean? Are they out the front of the library after hours?

**Jo de MORTON:** No, during library hours – well, that is a good question. I do not know if any of them turn off their wi-fi after hours.

**Dan HARPER:** No. A lot of them still will work outside a lot of libraries after hours, and we are seeing people utilise that for longer periods of time.

**Jo de MORTON:** To help them finish their homework and get things done, yes. They have got meeting room spaces as well and a whole range of diverse child, youth and adult programs. You already mentioned I think that they also can support Victorian government services in rural areas and council services, so lots of people are making use of those spaces. Public Libraries Victoria receive funding under the public libraries funding program to provide shared services too, to help libraries with some of their technology and infrastructure. With financial support we are working out how we can better utilise those, kind of, community hubs, maybe community health, and what are the other ways that we can use some of that physical infrastructure space and really make them a centre of the community.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** I think one of the things that I really understand is how safe libraries are for our community. I know rainbow toolkits were brought up before, and I am just wondering why we support such a program. What does it seek to do? Because there is always a lot of misinformation across our community.

**Jo de MORTON:** Do you want to pick this one up again, Dan?

**Dan HARPER:** Yes. I am happy to. The toolkits are designed for library staff to have conversations with the LGBTQI community, so when they approach the desk with questions either about resources that might be available to them in the library or indeed how they are addressed and referred to by the staff, then there are kits there to help the library staff have that in a safe and respectful manner with the people there. It really goes to ensuring that the library remains that safe and sensitive place for everyone and accessible for all Victorians.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Great. Everyone should be welcome everywhere across our community, particularly in local government facilities. I might talk to governance and integrity. We did talk a little bit about local councils and how they are meeting their obligations. I am just hoping we can talk a little bit about the local government performance reporting framework. I know this is a retitled program, but if you could just explain what the framework is and how it assists councils and government.

**Jo de MORTON:** Thanks. I mentioned it before when we were talking about the Know Your Council website, which is kind of the end result of the process. But if we go back a few steps, what it is is a standardised methodology for measuring and reporting on performance so ratepayers and anyone else interested can stay informed about how councils perform and can compare them to other councils. We are also hearing from councils themselves that it is a really useful benchmarking tool for them, and they can have a look at how they are going relative to others. The framework is mandatory under the Local Government (Planning and Reporting) Regulations. Councils are required to report on 58 indicators that measure costs and service performance of things like roads, waste, recycling, maternal and child health, libraries – which we talked about – and aquatic facilities, among many other things. They must also report against 24 items related to governance and management. These measures that they have to report on form part of their annual report and together with their financial statements they are audited by the Victorian Auditor-General. This year, 2023–24, was the first year that councils set their own performance targets against eight of the 58 indicators. That was a new layer of accountability for them, having targets as well as measuring. They submit all of that into the Know Your Council website. The community can then access their performance and compare it, and as I said, the councils themselves have that really rich data source to help them look at continuous improvement.



**Mathew HILAKARI:** Have they reported against those eight yet, or is this the very first year? We are not a full year through that first eight that they have reported against themselves or set their own targets against? Or have they just finished that?

**Jo de MORTON:** I thought they had just finished it.

**Dan HARPER:** They have just finished that, for that first year's data.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Do we have any early data to understand how councils have compared against their own standards?

**Dan HARPER:** We will be able to take that on notice and get you that information.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Yes, fantastic. And do we do any best-in-class-type work with councils around those performance standards, or are we starting to think about how we can utilise that really rich data better?

**Jo de MORTON:** Yes. What we do is offer councils a review service on their performance statements to help them make sure that they are reporting in the best way. In terms of then how to help them improve their services –

**Dan HARPER:** We, Local Government Victoria, work closely with councils at all times, and we have conversations with them about a range of things that they undertake to provide some advice in relation to that. In relation to the specific metrics, we do not have a ranking table or anything like that. Every council, even within those metrics, has some different circumstances and different reasons for that.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Of course. Some are big; some are very small.

**Dan HARPER:** Some are big, some are small, some are rural, some are metro – we have got a whole range of everything in between. While you can compare your like councils together, and then people are able to do that, they are really just a guide, those metrics.

**Jo de MORTON:** We have spent a lot of time trying to improve the advice and support we give to councils. I think I mentioned earlier that their satisfaction rating that we ask them for is starting to improve now. I think that is a significant effort on how to help them use those tools for their advantage, rather than as a burden.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Thank you for all the new governance training that is being rolled out right now for new councillors and mayors. That support for them is really appreciated and seeing better governance across the state.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr Hilakari.

**Gayle PORTHOUSE:** Would I be able to correct the record very quickly, if we have got a minute?

**The CHAIR:** Yes.

**Gayle PORTHOUSE:** On the matter of the fleet vehicles, there are 15,121 active vehicles. There are 518 that are ZEV and 4000 that are hybrids. The other thing that will assist us with getting more electrical vehicles into the fleet is the new legislation that is coming through from the Commonwealth, which insists that cars are cleaner cars. That will assist us in getting more of those vehicles in. At the moment they are being held in Europe because they have had much higher standards than we did around clean vehicles.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** I really appreciate that. That is really great. Thank you.

**Gayle PORTHOUSE:** Sorry about that; I was scuffling for too long.

**Bev McARTHUR:** If there are so many active vehicles, how many inactive ones are there?

**The CHAIR:** Excuse me, Mrs McArthur. Ms Porthouse was very accommodating in responding to Mr Puglielli's question, which he asked earlier.

Secretary and officials, 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. The committee is going to take a 15-minute break before its consideration of court services at 3:45 pm.

I declare this hearing adjourned.

**Witnesses withdrew.**