

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2023–24 Budget Estimates

Melbourne – Thursday 8 June 2023

MEMBERS

Sarah Connolly – Chair

Nicholas McGowan – Deputy Chair

Michael Galea

Paul Hamer

Mathew Hilakari

Lauren Kathage

Bev McArthur

Danny O’Brien

Ellen Sandell

WITNESSES

Ms Harriet Shing MLC, Minister for Regional Development,

Mr Tim Ada, Secretary,

Ms Beth Jones, Deputy Secretary, Regional and Suburban Development, and

Mr Anthony Schinck, Executive Director, Regions, Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions.

The CHAIR: I declare open this hearing of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee.

I ask that mobile telephones please be turned to silent.

On behalf of the Parliament, the committee is conducting this Inquiry into the 2023–24 Budget Estimates. The committee's aim is to scrutinise public administration and finance to improve outcomes for the Victorian community.

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

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

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

I welcome the Minister for Regional Development the Honourable Harriet Shing and officers from the Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions. You are very much welcome. Minister, I am going to invite you to make an opening statement presentation of no more than 5 minutes, and this will be followed by questions from the committee. Your time starts now.

Harriet SHING: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, committee, for the opportunity to present to you today. I want to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the lands upon which we variously meet, both here in Melbourne – Wurundjeri and Woiwurrung country – and around rural and regional Victoria. I pay my respects to the traditional owners of the lands and also acknowledge any and all Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander leaders or emerging leaders who are here today or indeed who are part of the work to deliver this incredibly important suite of priorities across the regional development portfolio.

Visual presentation.

Harriet SHING: First slide, please. The state of the regions and the work that we are doing is really underpinned by regional development, economic growth and a population that is increasing. We do know also that we have achieved significant gains in a low unemployment rate – all but the lowest on record – of 3.4 per cent across regional Victoria. This is 1.1 per cent lower than in March 2020. We also have a situation where, noting the lumpiness of those unemployment figures from LGA to LGA and the significant variation around the state, there are a range of initiatives that are intended to provide opportunities for economic growth and for support and also to assist in transition and the development of new and emerging industries.

We have provided a range of packages and of supports and of programs to address cost-of-living impacts and challenges, including those relating to flood and to natural disaster and emergency, and our regional economy is worth almost \$100 billion. It grows on average by about \$2.2 billion every year – at least it has since 2014.

The regions account for about a quarter of Victoria's economic output, population, small business and employment. We do know, as I said, when population growth continues to rise, and we see a population speculated to be at around 11.2 billion people – million, not billion, yeah, yeah; if it is billion, then that is the scoop here for today – around the state, including in Melbourne, by 2050. There are a lot of challenges to meet but there are also a lot of opportunities to be harnessed, and we want to make sure that labour force participation continues to grow and that we continue to support export markets and opportunities.

Next slide, please. Complex issues are a really important part of the work that regional development and this portfolio have prioritised. Housing, workforce shortages and industry transitions – these are priorities that have been identified to me and to my predecessors and to public officials, agencies and organisations for a really long period of time. They are complex challenges, but they are not challenges unique to Victoria. Around Australia and in other jurisdictions we are seeing that housing and workforce shortages require innovative and place-based solutions, and that is in fact a range of the commitments we have made to develop and deliver initiatives and incentives for development and for trunk infrastructure and support to enable this to happen.

We want to unlock the land for housing, as I have said, at a range of locations, and we are continuing to support the investment and enhancement of existing businesses. Most recently Wodonga and Mars Petcare announced a \$112 million expansion at Wodonga, which means that part of this exceptionally growing market of cat ownership – and I do not profess to be amongst that cohort – has seen the demand for niche and prestige cat food offerings to be skyrocketing. Mars has made a really wonderful contribution, and that work continues as a local employer. Nestlé in Broadford is another example, bringing the Mintie back to Australia after a trip to New Zealand and seeing how that is creating really important local employment opportunities for people.

Nicholas McGOWAN: What about the Poly Waffle?

Harriet SHING: The regional workforce pilot program has been really important, and we have a local presence across rural and regional Victoria. Making sure that regional projects across those five regions are really geared toward livability, community growth and transformation is part of this work. We are under no illusions about the challenges that we face in rural and regional Victoria, but there are also so many things to be proud of and so many things to celebrate as we work with communities and across governments of all levels to achieve better growth, better investment and a brighter and more prosperous future now and for generations to come. The first time ever, Chair, that I have stopped before an alert!

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. I was just stuck on that Poly Waffle comment.

Nicholas McGOWAN: It's a chocolate bar.

Harriet SHING: Was that referring to me or to a –

Nicholas McGOWAN: No, it's a chocolate bar.

Harriet SHING: Right. Okay. Good.

Nicholas McGOWAN: You don't remember it?

Harriet SHING: I do remember the Poly Waffle.

Danny O'BRIEN: Certainly the first time you have been stuck for words, Minister.

Harriet SHING: No, I am dumbstruck.

The CHAIR: I am going to go to Mr O'Brien for the next 7 minutes.

Danny O'BRIEN: Thank you, Chair. Minister, good afternoon. As a regional minister, regional MP, and in your first budget as Minister for Regional Development, why have you cut the rural and regional budget paper? It has been there for 12 years every year on a bipartisan basis.

Harriet SHING: The budget paper itself contains information that is set out in this budget around regional development investments and initiatives –

Danny O'BRIEN: I am well aware of that. But we have got a gender equality statement and we have got a budget highlights statement. There has always been a rural and regional one, but there is not one this year.

Harriet SHING: We do have a whole-of-state investment in rural and regional Victoria. It informs everything that we do. I am never shy of getting my elbows out and advocating for funding, and this is where we see a \$5 billion investment that also sits alongside a range of statewide initiatives. When we think about the way in which we are developing and delivering housing, for example, \$1.25 billion of the total \$5.3 billion in

the Big Housing Build is going to rural and regional Victoria. We think about the work that is happening with free TAFE. Universal access to three- and four-year-old kinder – that was trialled. As you know, Mr O'Brien, South Gippsland Shire Council, your neck of the woods, was one of the first five councils to deliver universal access to three-year-old kinder, and this is –

Danny O'BRIEN: None of which is relevant to your portfolio, Minister.

Harriet SHING: Well, it is when we are in rural and regional Victoria, Mr O'Brien. It is again where we are talking about –

Bev McArthur interjected.

The CHAIR: Mrs McArthur!

Harriet SHING: It is again where we are talking about an overall investment of \$5 billion. That is a record investment in terms of what has been delivered, and across the course of this government our average, I think, has been about \$4.6 billion. I think that is more than double what was invested between 2010 and 2014. So that is actually really comprehensively set out in the budget, but again we are really determined to continue that work and to continue to provide opportunities for rural and regional Victoria to grow.

Danny O'BRIEN: Okay. Budget paper 3, page 237, shows the government has halved the regional development budget for 2023–24. That is more than a 50 per cent reduction. It is a 39.5 per cent reduction on your own figures on the budget last year, but it is actually more than half the revised figure. Is that why you are embarrassed and do not actually have a rural and regional paper in the budget?

Harriet SHING: I am not embarrassed at all, Mr O'Brien –

Danny O'BRIEN: By a 50 per cent cut?

Harriet SHING: What I am determined to do is to make sure that Regional Development Victoria within DJSIR is at the heart of the work that we are doing to deliver initiatives across the state as part of record investments in skills and training, in infrastructure, in job creation, in health care and in making sure that we have more than a seat at the table in what is delivered in real dollar terms to create jobs and to drive growth. This is borne out in the figures. This is about job creation. It is about prosperity. It is about making sure we are strengthening the basis for communities in rural and regional Victoria to thrive but also to welcome that population growth which we know, and you know all too well, is coming to rural and regional Victoria.

Danny O'BRIEN: Minister, you have indicated that the budget delivers \$5 billion for rural and regional Victoria, and the Premier on Friday used that figure too. He said it was a record boost for regional Victoria. I have the pleasure or misfortune of having been around a fair while, and it was three years ago that we had your predecessor Ms Symes promoting a record \$8 billion budget spend on rural and regional Victoria, so why have you cut \$3 billion in the last three years.

Harriet SHING: Nice try, Mr O'Brien. What I would say to you is that –

Danny O'BRIEN: That is not a try, that is what the minister said.

Harriet SHING: I have not seen what the minister has said. I am not aware of what my predecessor may or may not have said in terms of her comments around a budget estimates process or any context that she may have put around that, for example, on programs that were delivered across rural and regional Victoria –

Danny O'BRIEN: 'The fund is key to the government's \$8 billion investment across regional Victoria unveiled in the Andrews Labor government 2020–21 budget.'

Harriet SHING: I am always a fan – Mr O'Brien, you know this from when we sat on PAEC together: context is really, really important, and you would know –

Danny O'BRIEN: What more context do you want?

Harriet SHING: Well, what does the rest of the document say?

Danny O'BRIEN: The previous minister said: 'The government's \$8 billion investment across regional and rural Victoria unveiled in the Andrews Labor budget 2020–21.'

Harriet SHING: What does the rest of the document say, though? This is the thing: when you actually bundle up a range of different allocations –

Danny O'BRIEN: Are you saying that she was wrong?

Harriet SHING: I do not have the document that you are actually purporting to quote from, and therefore I am really happy to talk about what this budget has in it for rural and regional Victoria. I do not think it serves the purpose –

Danny O'BRIEN: So a 50 per cent cut to regional development and a \$3 billion cut since the previous minister.

Harriet SHING: See, this is where, again, Mr O'Brien, the constant battle that you and I have on the ground in our shared part of the state is that you are constantly saying that this government has not delivered, and the figures just demonstrably show that we have delivered more than the government that was here in Victoria from 2010 to 2014 and that that work goes on – \$36 billion in infrastructure across rural and regional Victoria. You talk about the way in which we delivered within that budget for infrastructure – 36 per cent in last year's budget went to rural and regional Vic, so –

Danny O'BRIEN: What is it in this year's budget, then, Minister?

Harriet SHING: Infrastructure? We have got \$5 billion across rural and regional Victoria.

Danny O'BRIEN: Of new spending?

Harriet SHING: Five billion dollars, as I have said, as was outlined in my presentation, on a range of initiatives that include infrastructure.

Danny O'BRIEN: Okay. Ms Jones, can you confirm there is no new grant funding – in fact there is no grant funding left in RDV going forward?

Beth JONES: Mr O'Brien, that is not correct.

Harriet SHING: No.

Beth JONES: No.

Danny O'BRIEN: How much is left?

Beth JONES: I have not got the entire figure with me at the moment, Mr O'Brien. There is grant funding in the out years for regional development, quite significant grant funding in the out years for regional development, for a range of projects.

Danny O'BRIEN: Where is that in the budget papers?

Beth JONES: It is within the output, Mr O'Brien. The output I would draw your attention to – sorry, within this \$106.6 million output, Mr O'Brien. That would include, for example, RJIF money that is phased in the coming year.

Danny O'BRIEN: I would have thought this would be something you would be able to tell me off the top of your head. Can you tell me how much grant funding is left, because there is no additional grant funding allocated in this year's budget other than the Tiny Towns project.

Harriet SHING: I am happy to take you through that if you would like, Mr O'Brien. Within the RJIF –

The CHAIR: Apologies, Minister. Mr O'Brien's time is up. We will go to Mr Galea.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Chair. Hello again, Minister. Afternoon, officials. Minister, can I please draw your attention to page 54, budget overview. If I can ask you in broad terms what this budget actually seeks to make and deliver for regional Victoria, and how does it build on the previous investment by this government?

Harriet SHING: Yes. Thank you, Mr Galea. As I indicated in my presentation, we are funding every single regional commitment that we made at the election and delivering a range of services and projects that really matter to rural and regional Victoria. There is around \$45 million worth of dedicated investment in regional development programs, and that might perhaps assist Mr O'Brien with some part of what he asked before. \$21 million has been provided for the redevelopment of the Bendigo Art Gallery, for example. This is about creating an opportunity for a cultural and visitor attraction to be developed for a key centre for rural and regional Victoria. But the halo impact of what happens – we see and we know from regional centres where we have this level of investment – should never be underestimated. Not only do we see jobs being created in construction and people being employed as part of the ongoing operation of these sorts of projects but we also see through enhanced visitor expenditure, more time spent, greater visitor numbers and partnerships with a range of other parts of our government – including Minister Dimopoulos and the work that he is doing with the major events and tourism space – that we have got a range of really important opportunities here and that those opportunities include at every turn engagement with First Nations diversity, stories, culture and connection.

There has been \$6 million for infrastructure work at the Bendigo regional employment precinct and making sure, as I said in my presentation, we have got enabling infrastructure there to unlock tracts of land for redevelopment. Partnering with Bendigo City Council on this project is one example of many examples of how we actually work alongside different levels of government.

There is \$10 million for the new Tiny Towns grant program, and this is something which is really, really important. We know that our small towns across rural and regional Victoria have the most wonderful things to share with the world, and they also deserve a range of opportunities to secure funding, and that is why these grants, between \$5000 and \$50,000, will be made available to towns to connect and to celebrate. That might be something –

Bev McARTHUR: Connect? Nobody will be able to get there, Minister, the roads are so bad.

Harriet SHING: I would disagree, Mrs McArthur. When you can hop on a V/Line train where those fares are capped at metro prices – \$9.20, Mrs McArthur – that is a wonderful opportunity for people to get out and about. It is also a really wonderful thing to be able to celebrate what livability and what community pride look like. We go to these little towns to escape, to enjoy new experiences, to spend time with our families, to get out onto the rail trails, Mrs McArthur, and perhaps you might like to join me one day on them.

But also, to continue the work that we are doing to fund the Latrobe Valley Authority, there is \$7.2 million over the next 12 months. We will continue to deliver those really important youth and worker transition programs, and the Ladder Step Up program is one such example of how we are making sure that young people have these opportunities to participate in mentoring, in positive role modelling, in community connectedness. That is then leading to pathways into training, into work experience, into qualifications and people being able to embrace aspiration – what is it that they want to do in terms of a trade, in terms of further education? We are seeing that they are paying dividends.

We have also had small but really important projects in St Leonards, in Warrnambool, Cockatoo and Beechworth that were supported in this budget, and we just want to make sure that that work continues and that we reach into our communities to help them to shape what it is that they want to achieve into the future.

Michael GALEA: Fantastic. Sounds like everything from Yarram to Yackandandah's been funded, so great to hear.

Ellen SANDELL: Who wrote you that line?

Danny O'BRIEN: The PPO. They have got to do a better job than this.

Michael GALEA: It is a great line. I just wrote it, Mr O'Brien.

Harriet SHING: Mallacoota to Mildura.

Danny O'BRIEN: At least. Come on, that is the obvious one.

Michael GALEA: I think that is a bit too obvious, isn't it?

Danny O'BRIEN: Yarram to Yackandandah – is that what it was?

Michael GALEA: It just came to me. I don't know.

Harriet SHING: That is why you need V/Line's cut-price fares to get around the state.

Michael GALEA: Absolutely, absolutely. Minister, if I can draw your attention to the –

Harriet SHING: Warrnambool to Wodonga – there we go.

Michael GALEA: Even better. Regional development programs in this budget – I understand that there is \$45 million of investment for that fund. Could you please elaborate on some of those projects under that initiative?

Harriet SHING: Yes, absolutely. We do want to make sure that we have dedicated investment in regional development and that we are supporting that capability- and capacity-building framework. So across government and in the course of this record investment in rural and regional Victoria, we have seen the development of a really strong and resilient regional economy. We have done a lot of work also to partner with other jurisdictions. The partnerships and the networks that have been developed and have really, really been strengthened over the years from within regional development and those local offices have spread into the range of discussions that are brought to the table within regional partnerships, within engagements with local council and local government areas, making sure that we are partnering and working alongside the Commonwealth, Regional Development Australia – those engagements on how we can make the most of shared resources and shared priorities.

Livability is also really important in making sure we can continue to drive down unemployment. As I said earlier, there is variation in unemployment figures around the state. It is inherent in the way that statistics are gathered. What we have seen, however, is significant trending downward of unemployment. The assistance with the cost of living has also been a big part of what we are doing to support growth in rural and regional Victoria. We know that there are challenges around workforce and around housing shortages, but we also know that through a tailored program of access to training and through support for housing developments and that infrastructure being released, we have the right framework in place to continue to develop those inputs, that \$1.35 billion at least as part of the Big Housing Build. When we came to office, the unemployment rate around regional Victoria was about double what it was at last count.

The CHAIR: Apologies, Minister.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Minister.

The CHAIR: I am going to go back to Mr O'Brien for the next 7 minutes.

Danny O'BRIEN: Thank you, Chair. Ms Jones, can I just go back to that issue of asking about regional development funding. Can I ask you to take on notice then, if you do not have data on what is currently –

Harriet SHING: We do.

Danny O'BRIEN: Well, the question was how much is available for regional development funding for grants programs. Do you have a figure for that at the moment, jobs in particular? Just by way of example, I just had a quick look at RDV's website, and I am not sure that these are all DJSIR programs, but the Regional Infrastructure Fund, closed; Stronger Regional Communities, closed; Regional Tourism Infrastructure Fund, closed; Latrobe Valley Economic Facilitation Fund, closed; the Ride High Country Fund, closed – just as an example. The Regional Jobs Fund is open. So can you tell me what, out of your department's funding streams, there actually is left?

Beth JONES: Yes. So obviously, Mr O'Brien, the Regional Jobs Fund is open, it remains open. That is an active funding stream at the moment.

Danny O'BRIEN: And how much money is in that?

Beth JONES: The balance of that, Mr O'Brien, would be in the order of I think about \$2.5 million – \$2 million.

Danny O'BRIEN: \$2 million?

Beth JONES: Correct. In terms of your question about next year, what types of grants are available within that output, the Minister has talked about the \$10 million for Tiny Towns, she has talked about the Bendigo Art Gallery, she has talked about the Bendigo industrial precinct. There is also significant money that is phased from existing RDV projects that continue to deliver into the out years, Mr O'Brien. So for example, we have about 650 active projects right across the state.

Danny O'BRIEN: Can I get, perhaps on notice, the actual funding amounts left –

Beth JONES: A breakdown.

Danny O'BRIEN: Yes, and a breakdown – that are the contestable grants, so not ones that are already allocated to something but that businesses could apply to.

Harriet SHING: Within that, there is also again \$800 million –

Danny O'BRIEN: Thank you. Sorry, Ms Jones, can I just get you to say yes, just for the record?

Beth JONES: Yes, Mr O'Brien.

Danny O'BRIEN: Thank you.

Harriet SHING: So, again, I do not want to tread on the toes of the Minister for Commonwealth Games Legacy's presentation, which I understand will be coming up shortly, but there is that procurement pipeline, \$800 million for 1200 –

Danny O'BRIEN: Can we please rule this out of order, Chair? This is not this portfolio.

Harriet SHING: Well, it is regional Victoria, Mr O'Brien.

Danny O'BRIEN: Yes, but it is not this portfolio – we will come to that.

Harriet SHING: It is a competitive process for winning contracts for exactly the sort of thing that you are talking about, so let us put that in context, because that is actually a really important part of the objectives of securing those outcomes for rural and regional Victoria.

Danny O'BRIEN: Minister, you have issued a –

Harriet SHING: Did you just say you were going to raise a point of order about whether I can talk about that?

Danny O'BRIEN: Well, your colleagues have been fairly well trained, but they missed that one. Normally if I talk about a different portfolio –

The CHAIR: Mr O'Brien.

Danny O'BRIEN: Minister, you have issued a media release – coincidentally, this morning – about the community leadership program, \$700,000, to continue it just for this calendar year. Was that just an oversight that the government did not fund it in the budget?

Harriet SHING: No, not at all.

Danny O'BRIEN: Where is it in the budget then?

Harriet SHING: The community leadership program was funded until the end of June. What I wanted to see happen was that project and that program with the 212 participants, I think, being able to complete that

process so that they would have the same equity of opportunity as other participants within other intakes. So this is where again in a constrained budgetary environment – and I am not going to gild the lily at all; it is a tough operating environment, and there have been a range of commitments towards savings that are part of delivering on future outcomes and objectives – that additional money, that \$700,000, will actually see that those participants can go through until the end of the year.

Danny O'BRIEN: Yes. I have read the media release. Where is it in the budget papers, what you have announced this morning?

Harriet SHING: There is \$700,000 that will be repurposed from an underspend following negotiations and advocacy and representations that I made, and this is about making sure that we can ensure leadership opportunities for people.

Danny O'BRIEN: An underspend in your department?

Harriet SHING: Within RDV.

Danny O'BRIEN: Within RDV. What was it underspent on, do you know?

Harriet SHING: Well, there was \$700,000 for that.

Danny O'BRIEN: Yes, but what is it is coming from?

Harriet SHING: There was an investment project that was withdrawn, and that money was able to be repurposed. That is the same as Go Goldfields as well. There was an additional \$225,000 for that program to be able to continue too – until the end of the calendar year, just to be really clear about that point.

Danny O'BRIEN: We all understand the constrained budgetary environment, because we know the government has totally lost control of the budget, but you are on the record saying what an important program this is. From 31 December all these programs are just going to be left to their own devices and will have to run their own funding. The Committee for Ballarat told us this week that without the government base funding they probably cannot run it.

Harriet SHING: It has been a really important thing to build capacity within existing programs. The regional partnerships are one example of that, and that is where their important work continues to be funded. It is also about the way in which we have created frameworks for leaders across rural and regional Victoria to become involved and to develop skills, expertise and networks. The benefit of that work –

Danny O'BRIEN: All of which I agree with, so why cut the funding after this year?

Harriet SHING: The benefit of that work continues, though, Mr O'Brien. This is where, again, we have invested in our rural and regional communities to assist with leadership development through a range of different programs and pathways. This is, again, funding that will secure the completion of the program for those 212 participants in the current intake, and then –

Danny O'BRIEN: For this year, and next year they are on their own; there will be no state government funding.

Harriet SHING: What you are seeking to say is that there will not be any support for any leadership aspirations within rural and regional Victoria. That does a big disservice to your electorate.

Danny O'BRIEN: No, I did not say that. You are putting words in my mouth, Minister. I said specifically –

Harriet SHING: Tit for tat, Mr O'Brien.

Danny O'BRIEN: Specifically for this leadership program there will be no funding from 31 December.

Harriet SHING: There is funding for a range of leadership opportunities, and that will continue to be the case from next year. I am delighted that we can actually see this intake complete the 2023 period so that again those leaders are able to do that important work in the community alongside other leadership pathways that we are delivering.

Danny O'BRIEN: Thank you. Ms Jones, is the \$7.2 million allocated to the LVA in the budget fully for staff and wages?

Beth JONES: Not fully, Mr O'Brien. The \$7.2 million is largely for staff and wages, but it also includes some program funding for the Ladder Step Up program and for the transition program.

Danny O'BRIEN: But again there is no grant funding left in the LVA?

Harriet SHING: There are other grants, Mr O'Brien, across government –

Danny O'BRIEN: In the LVA?

Beth JONES: Yes.

Danny O'BRIEN: Can you tell me how many full-time equivalent staff there are at the LVA as at now?

Beth JONES: Yes. There are 32, Mr O'Brien.

Danny O'BRIEN: Thirty-two. And are they all based in the Latrobe Valley permanently?

Beth JONES: Yes. With the exception of the fact that we have some flexible work and people are moving around quite a bit, yes, they are largely based in the Latrobe Valley, Mr O'Brien.

Danny O'BRIEN: Okay. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Apologies, Mr O'Brien. Your time has expired. The next 7 minutes belong to Ms Kathage.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you, Chair, Minister and officials. At the top of my electorate is the tiny town of Wandong, which can be reached by train – and I would welcome Mrs McArthur, if she would like to join me there in Wandong. In fact I was there exactly this time last week with the Minister for Community Sport announcing \$195,000 for the Wandong footy oval. And we were overlooked, at the oval, by the community centre, which we are totally remodelling for that amazing town. In my remarks at the event, Minister, I said, 'There's something about Wandong,' because this is a group of very passionate local people who have lived there for a long time, who know their town inside out and who are so proud of their town and want it to be so beautiful. I remember sharing with them about the Tiny Towns Fund, which is detailed on page 70 of budget paper 3, and they were very excited. For the benefit of the committee, Minister, can you please share how the delivery of community infrastructure, facilities and capacity-building projects will help tiny towns like Wandong across Victoria thrive.

Harriet SHING: Thank you. That is a really important question because it is a really important part of rural and regional Victoria. There are around 281 tiny towns across rural and interface Victoria, and they have, as you have pointed out with Wandong, the most extraordinary diversity and history. They bring communities together in ways that mean that people wear about eight or nine different hats – the person you see marshalling the traffic at the footy oval will be someone else who is making scones at the school fete or turning out to an SES call. These are the sorts of things that need to be nurtured, and we also need to recognise the really important contribution that our tiny towns have made in some of the most challenging circumstances. Bushfires, floods, the pandemic, drought – these sorts of things test our communities time and time again, and these communities often have little latitude to be able to absorb the impacts of a range of the challenges that I have talked to earlier.

The Tiny Towns Fund will enable these 281 tiny towns to talk about projects that do not just respond to emerging challenges but also unlock the potential that they have, including through grants processes that are about celebrating local pride. We know that, for example, we can listen to communities, whether they need street furniture, whether they would like to put in murals, whether they want to engage in sorts of events or whether they want to talk about bridging gaps in community infrastructure, making sure that we can attract and retain people across rural and regional Victoria to as many places as possible as our population grows and we head towards that projected figure of 11.2 million people by 2050 across the state. We want to make sure that it is a good place to do business, that we are responding to the needs of local people and that we can support those smaller scale community-building approaches.

Often when we talk about the advocacy that happens from these tiny towns we do not see them represented in the strategic plans or the priorities, for example, of councils – which is not to say that they are unimportant, it is just that strategic priorities may well be geared towards the larger envelopes that councils are allocating funding to, or they may not get the visibility that they deserve. That is why this particular fund is about addressing and acknowledging the importance of our tiny towns but also providing a model which is able to be accessed by them without the competitive detriment that means they may be drowned out.

We have a range of opportunities. I am really looking forward to seeing that over the four years and the forward estimates this Tiny Towns Fund can actually show our tiny towns off in the best possible light. Again, I do not want to tread on the toes of the next ministerial appearance, but as we head towards the Commonwealth Games, as we look towards the eyes of the world being on us, we want to make sure that every part of the state can shine. We will have a baton relay that takes us over a number of weeks right through Victoria. We want to make sure that our tiny towns are beautiful, are accessible, are welcoming and are open to the visitors that we anticipate will want to stop by and enjoy them.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you, Minister. The eligibility is capped at a population of 5000 or less. Can you explain why that cap is in place?

Harriet SHING: Yes. We want to make sure also that accessibility goes to where it is needed most, and for those 281 tiny towns there are a range of challenges that often mean that allocations, as I said, do not come through in competitive processes involving multiple levels of government. We have to draw a line somewhere. Five thousand is a way to scoop in many of those rural and regional towns but also the peri-urban and interface areas to make sure that we can meet people in their communities in ways that are right for them. That is why we also have a band of eligibility for the grants as well – there are ranges that people can put their hands up for for the sorts of things that are right for them. We want to have a breadth but also a sense of opportunity for those towns without, as I said, their having to duke it out for funding with very big regional centres.

Lauren KATHAGE: I think Wandong is ready to duke it out, but anyway. You mentioned tourism opportunities coming through the Tiny Towns Fund. You talked about the baton relay for the Commonwealth Games. What role do you see tiny towns having in the Victorian visitor economy?

Harriet SHING: We see a really rich creative vein going through many of our tiny towns. That is part of the creative events calendar opportunities – how do we feed that in and how do we turn that into economic prosperity? How do we also make sure that community streetscapes and facilities are activated? How do we also make sure that people can call our tiny towns home but also work closer to where they live as well? We want to also present our tiny towns as sustainable players, including in those prestige niche and microbusiness opportunities. We have got around 317,000 people who live in these 281 towns. The aggregate of those numbers is significant, and that is where, again, we need to have solutions that address the scale of these challenges but also deliver outcomes in a way that is place based and in a way that communities are looking for rather than being told what it is that they will get.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you, Minister.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. The next 7 minutes go to Mr O'Brien.

Danny O'BRIEN: Thank you, Chair. Ms Jones, just continuing on Tiny Towns – it is going to be very hard not to say 'tidy towns' – how much of that money is already allocated to cover Labor election commitments?

Beth JONES: Sorry, Mr O'Brien, can I clarify which money you are –

Danny O'BRIEN: The \$10 million for the Tiny Towns Fund.

Beth JONES: The \$10 million.

Danny O'BRIEN: Yes. Any?

Beth JONES: A small amount, Mr O'Brien. Sorry, Mr O'Brien, let me just clarify this. There is a very small amount. I will get the figure for you, Mr O'Brien –

Danny O'BRIEN: By the end or on notice.

Beth JONES: The Cockatoo town hall, for example, Mr O'Brien –

Harriet SHING: I think there is \$50,000 for the Cockatoo market. That is actually listed in the budget paper as well, Mr O'Brien, I believe.

Danny O'BRIEN: Would you mind providing a list, if there is anything more than that, on notice?

Harriet SHING: Yes.

Harriet SHING: It is just the \$50,000 for the Cockatoo –

Danny O'BRIEN: That is it? Okay, thank you.

Harriet SHING: But that is in fact part of the deliverable of the objective of the fund.

Danny O'BRIEN: Yes. Ms Jones, sorry, can I go back to my previous question about the staff at the LVA. You were answering at the time: are they all based in the Latrobe Valley?

Beth JONES: Thirty-two, yes, Mr O'Brien.

Danny O'BRIEN: Yes. Okay.

Harriet SHING: By Gippslanders for Gippslanders, I think, Mr O'Brien, which you would be delighted about.

Danny O'BRIEN: Different to the start, but anyway – when it started. Of the \$7.2 million, how much of that is actually allocated to staff salary and wages costs?

Beth JONES: I can tell you that, Mr O'Brien. The answer to that question is \$6.47 million.

Danny O'BRIEN: \$6.47 million divided by 32 is a total average of \$200,000. Is that right – \$200,000 per job?

Harriet SHING: And overheads, did you say?

Beth JONES: Yes, overheads. There is a range of operational costs – costs of buildings, costs of vehicles. It is encompassing all those things.

Danny O'BRIEN: Right. So that is not just wages then?

Beth JONES: No, absolutely. It is wages –

Harriet SHING: The total cost of running the LVA is \$7.2 million.

Danny O'BRIEN: I knew that, yes. That is in the budget.

Harriet SHING: Okay, just to be clear. I would hate for you to think, though, that this was about the figure of – what did you say – \$200,000?

Danny O'BRIEN: Well, \$6.47 million –

Harriet SHING: No, do not –

Danny O'BRIEN: Sorry, let us clarify this. I actually asked what the salary and wages cost is.

Beth JONES: Oh, the salary and wages cost – I do not have that in front of me, Mr O'Brien, but it is out of that.

Danny O'BRIEN: Okay. Could you provide that on notice?

Beth JONES: Yes.

Danny O'BRIEN: Thank you, Minister, I just want to talk about the transition plan, because as we know there was only \$7.2 million last year for the LVA. The previous minister told us that basically its job now, apart from the Ladder Step Up program, is basically a transition plan. We have got a draft of the transition plan out, and there are there are no recommendations, no concrete actions. It talks about a vision, and it has got things like that the shared vision of our future includes:

- education and training pathway options that link to employment in appealing, meaningful local jobs – and employment pathways –
- a thriving economy ...

Every region would want that. It is motherhood stuff. We have now got the government shutting down the timber industry. We have lost 130 jobs already at the Maryvale mill so far this year, and there are more to come. We are going to see Yallourn close in 2028. Where is there actually a bright future and industries coming to the valley, or to Gippsland?

Harriet SHING: Thank you, Mr O'Brien. There is a lot in what you have just said, and I do want to talk to the challenges. As I have referenced in my presentation, transition is difficult. Transition has been incredibly challenging for the Latrobe Valley and for Gippsland more broadly. The announcements around the end of native timber harvesting in state forests from 1 January next year have been incredibly distressing, and this is where again that \$388 million, which is in this year's budget, which I suspect my colleague Ms Tierney has referred to, is part of that overall package. I think it is more than \$875 million. Transition is occurring, as you well known, across a range of sectors and industries within Gippsland.

Danny O'BRIEN: Some of it is driven by government policy, Minister.

Harriet SHING: I will take you up on that, Mr O'Brien. What would you have done –

Danny O'BRIEN: You could have amended the timber code of practice.

Harriet SHING: where in fact VicForests spent \$14 million on litigation, where timber yards have been empty for the last six months –

Danny O'BRIEN: Taken out the precautionary principle from the Act.

Harriet SHING: where people have been at home while their mental health suffers, and you say that this could be fixed with the stroke of a pen. We have advice –

Danny O'BRIEN: Ah, here we go. The advice that no-one knows about.

Harriet SHING: We have advice that says that this cannot be fixed with legislation.

Danny O'BRIEN: And yet your government will not provide anyone that advice.

Harriet SHING: Mr O'Brien, there were more than 3000 changes made to your botched efforts to manage forestry after we came to government.

Danny O'BRIEN: Our botched efforts, but you are shutting the whole thing down.

Harriet SHING: And what we are trying to do is to not string communities along, because they deserve better than to be told that this is something that –

Danny O'BRIEN: They deserve their jobs, Minister, not a government that says, 'Oh, no, we can't do it. The legal advice says this, but we can't show you the legal advice.'

The CHAIR: Mr O'Brien!

Harriet SHING: Okay, so let us talk about plantation: 16 million trees as well as opportunities –

Danny O'BRIEN: You have not even got any plantations in the ground.

Harriet SHING: Planting is literally occurring right now, Mr O'Brien.

Danny O'BRIEN: Yes, six years after you announced the funding for it – six years.

Harriet SHING: In addition to that there is support being made available, because we recognise the problem. We are not hiding our heads in the sand and saying that there is some magical solution to a problem that is causing devastation across timber towns.

Danny O'BRIEN: No-one said it is magic.

Harriet SHING: I am under no illusions – none whatsoever – about the difficulty of this task, but unlike those opposite, who are very, very happy to say that things should be different, we are actually acknowledging the reality of the situation.

Danny O'BRIEN: Do not talk to your colleagues about that, Minister.

Harriet SHING: You look to New South Wales, this great example that is held up by you and your colleagues as being an answer to all of these questions. They are facing the same sort of uncertainty, and we need to respect the fact that these workers deserve the decency of being told –

Danny O'BRIEN: So once again you and your Premier say, 'We've got legal advice that said we couldn't act,' but you will not release it and tell people.

The CHAIR: Mr O'Brien!

Harriet SHING: what it is that we are doing to support them, what it is that we are providing, whether that is compensation, whether that is opt-outs, whether that is mental health support, whether that is a transition plan.

Danny O'BRIEN: No transparency. No accountability.

Harriet SHING: The work is hard, Mr O'Brien, and it was hard when we established the Latrobe Valley Authority –

Danny O'BRIEN: So where are the recommendations from the LVA?

Harriet SHING: because Engie gave us six months before they backed out of Hazelwood –

Danny O'BRIEN: And now you are giving the timber industry six months notice. You said you had a 10-year plan, and now you are cutting it off in seven months.

The CHAIR: Mr O'Brien!

Harriet SHING: before we actually had a situation on our hands where we were required to lean into the reality of closure and emergence from coal-fired power generation.

Danny O'BRIEN: You have just sold out the timber industry and are saying, 'Trust us, we've got legal advice.'

The CHAIR: Mr O'Brien!

Harriet SHING: This is record investment, but I am under no illusions about how difficult it will be. The last thing I think you should be doing is giving people false hope that this is an industry that can continue –

Danny O'BRIEN: I am asking you to give them some hope and actually show us the evidence that you could have done nothing.

Harriet SHING: just because you make up a narrative that is not legally sound and that is not sustainable, despite the best efforts of these communities to actually have a future for them in their communities.

Danny O'BRIEN: You have done nothing, and you are saying 'Trust us on legal advice' and hiding behind the lawyers.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr O'Brien. Your time is up. We will go to Mr Hilakari.

Mathew HILAKARI: Thank you, Minister, and thank you to all the departmental staff in being here this afternoon and particularly some of our returnees to many of these sessions. I might take you to the Bendigo Art Gallery, Minister, and you have mentioned this a little bit further, but also within the budget paper 3 it features on pages 70 and 75. Of course we all know of the success of the Bendigo Art Gallery, but I am just hoping you can explain how some of the funding in this budget will contribute to the support for the whole region.

Harriet SHING: Yes. Thank you for that, Mr Hilakari. The Bendigo Art Gallery is intended to sit within an overall precinct that celebrates the history, the growth and the potential of Bendigo. It is also really important to note that we are being guided by what the community wants to achieve in cultural and economic tourist opportunities and also that we can bring some of Australia's and indeed the world's best art to regional Victoria. We want to ensure that creatively and culturally and socially and economically we have a vision for Bendigo, and this is where again I know the Deputy Premier is unashamedly proud of the work that has been happening with her colleague the Speaker Ms Edwards to deliver this sort of funding to make sure that as we grow and develop as well as providing trunk infrastructure and unlocking land for development, as we work toward delivering livability outcomes, we are also making sure that our artistic and creative infrastructure is there to celebrate opportunities.

When we look at the regional success story that is the Bendigo Art Gallery we know it has an internationally recognised reputation. It has a really innovative approach to the way that it curates and delivers its projects, and it is estimated that this project's implementation will lift economic levels in the Bendigo region over the course of its redevelopment and then as part of ongoing operations. We will see during the peak of construction in year 2 of the project \$20 million in direct stimulus introduced to the economy, leading to around about 100 full-time jobs being created in Bendigo and \$41 million in regional income and about \$14 million in local value-add being generated in the process. So this is this halo impact that I was talking about earlier. And then after redevelopment there will be \$1 million to \$3 million in direct stimulus introduced to the local economy each year. It means that when people come to Bendigo for an event, they stay for an exhibition, that when they travel around, for example, to one of the tiny towns, they come back and they stay for a night. It is this stickiness in our regional and rural settings that means that wherever we can get people in –

Danny O'BRIEN: It was lumpy just before.

Harriet SHING: That was with other figures, Mr O'Brien, but thank you for listening – that we are in a position to make sure that people are coming to rural and regional Victoria, that they are spending money, that they are creating connections that mean that they come back for all of the right reasons.

I mean, Greater Bendigo is booming. We have got a whole lot of things around it already being a major drawcard – 150,000 to 200,000 people every year visiting Bendigo, and we will see increasing visitation of around 60,000 per year as a consequence of the reopening of the gallery. So there is a direct correlation between these sorts of projects and ongoing, enduring benefit, and again we want to make sure that the gallery is equipped to service the broader region as well. It speaks to a range of purposes and a range of achievements that will deliver pride of place and a world-class experience to everybody who comes along to see an exhibition.

Mathew HILAKARI: And I am sure many people will keep coming back because of the cheaper rail fares across regional Victoria.

Harriet SHING: And it is funny you should say that. Metro fare caps applying to V/Line travel is something that will in fact enhance access.

Mathew HILAKARI: Drive some of those repeat tourism visits.

Harriet SHING: I am sad Mrs McArthur is not here.

Danny O'BRIEN: I will take a point of order if you are going to talk about other portfolios.

Mathew HILAKARI: That is all right. I will take us to BP3, pages 232–4. I just want to understand how some of this investment and redevelopment at the Bendigo Art Gallery actually fits in with the departmental objectives.

Harriet SHING: Absolutely. We will be in a position to make sure that we have better cultural connection, education, economic prosperity and value and making sure that we can also grow really vibrant, active and creative communities. It is about competitiveness, it is about investment, it is about economic and social growth, but also it is about making sure that broadly we are aligned with the key priorities of infrastructure facilities and services in rural and regional Victoria; strengthening our economic, social and environmental bases of communities; creating jobs, which I have just taken you through; and improving career opportunities in rural and regional Vic; and also supporting the development and planning of local projects in rural and regional Vic. There is a lot in that, and a lot that actually is aligned very closely with a range of whole-of-state initiatives as well.

Mathew HILAKARI: And the importance of being on country and the Aboriginal community's involvement, could you please speak to that as well? Is there a proper engagement going on?

Harriet SHING: There is an enormously important engagement occurring. We want to make sure that First Nations-led objectives are at the heart of the development of this project, and that has been very symbolic of the approach taken across a range of other investments, whether in metropolitan Melbourne or at the edges of our state. Continuing culture and making sure that we have a new purpose-built place of keeping for the Dja Dja Wurrung collection, including public areas and access for education and display and private areas for community research and access, will be really important; a new learning centre for First Nations cultural workshops and curriculum-based learning; healing country and landscaped gardens to regenerate country and offer a site for talks and material for workshops, including activities; and foregrounding culture – so Djarra artwork etched into the facade of the gallery. And we know that this is part of a lot of the work that we have done to deliver infrastructure and amenity across regional Victoria that celebrates and places First Nations culture and stories and identity very visibly in all that we do. I have got 6 seconds, but supporting industry and participation for traditional owners is also of key importance, and contributing to labour force participation. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. I will now go to Ms Sandell. You have 7 minutes.

Ellen SANDELL: Thank you, Chair. Hi, again. Obviously regional Victoria has been hit really hard with disasters over the last little while, so I want to talk a little bit about replacing infrastructure. We have had a number of councils approach us and say they are frustrated with only being funded for like-for-like replacement of infrastructure, particularly when it is after something like a flood, and not actually being funded to provide more resilient infrastructure, for example, that might not be exactly the same as what was there before. Understanding that this also intersects with the roads portfolio, but there is \$2.8 billion for road maintenance and renewal, including flood recovery works. I do not know if you can provide me with information about how much of that is for flood recovery and whether it will actually allow for betterment of the infrastructure rather than just like-for-like replacement.

Harriet SHING: There are a couple of things in that, Ms Sandell, that might actually create difficulties for me in answering those questions simply because we have initiatives that have been funded through emergency services, the minister for infrastructure and roads, so that work that has been done through Minister Carroll. We worked really hard through the floods last year, and that work continues now, to make sure that people have access to processes by which repairs can take place and replacements can take place. It was a package of supports developed for businesses to develop economic recovery. That has ranged from supports to local businesses and community sports clubs through to councils, who received those payments of \$500,000 to assist and defray the cost of kerbside waste collection. But Emergency Recovery Victoria is leading that work, and that sits under the Minister for Emergency Services.

Ellen SANDELL: I appreciate that. I do not know if maybe yourself or the Secretary could answer, even if you cannot give specifics, just about, I guess, the principle of replacing like for like versus actually being able to build more resilient infrastructure.

Harriet SHING: Again, as I said, it sits under the Minister for Emergency Services, and so those decisions are taken within that portfolio. But RDV does chair the statewide business and economy working group and has also provided support to communities in a range of different ways in those partnerships. We want to make sure that those supports are available to impacted communities, but our regional economic recovery plan, which is led by RDV, is then resourced in various ways by different portfolios, so they might be questions that are most appropriately addressed to the Minister for Emergency Services.

Ellen SANDELL: Okay. I guess I will ask a related question that is a little bit broader than around climate resilience and disaster preparedness. Obviously, we have been through a really rough time, but things are only going to get worse. I mean, I am sure that you have all seen the latest IPCC report. I am sure you know what is coming for regional Victoria. There is an amount of climate change that is locked into our system that we cannot avoid, and we need to think about how we are adapting and how we are developing resilient infrastructure. We have councils come to us all the time and say that their stormwater is not up to scratch but they cannot as a council replace that, or their roads or infrastructure right, across the state, and regional Victoria will be bearing the brunt of that. Could you talk about where that planning is happening in terms of adaptation? I know the previous minister for energy talked about adaptation happening across government, so I assume that in your department that will be happening. What kind of preparation is being done for the huge challenge that we face around climate resilience and disaster preparedness?

Harriet SHING: Thank you, Ms Sandell. There is a lot in that that goes across the whole of government. My colleague Minister D'Ambrosio was here today, and I am not sure whether you asked her.

Ellen SANDELL: Yes, she said that it happens across government. So I guess, as it pertains to your portfolio, where is that planning happening?

Harriet SHING: Sure. This is where again it would have been really good to talk about this in the water discussion because of flood preparedness, flood studies, the flood management programs and the plans that have been delivered, including as they relate to relief and recovery, including as they relate to everything from managing work on assessments for levees to overspill events, technical reviews et cetera. But as you will note, in chapter 1 of BP3 there is a whole-of-government flood recovery outline, and those output initiatives are set out there. This relates to everything from community and sporting facilities again, which are developed and delivered in regional Victoria as we know; clean up activities; flood recovery and small business relief; business recovery support services; rebates for flood waste; and support, as I recently announced with the Minister for Planning, for councils to undertake flood studies to work that into planning approvals. These are the sorts of things that are about leaning into the reality of climate change and also of population growth, because we have a greater risk profile where population is moving to and living in areas that are prone, for example, to flooding – they are flood plains.

We want to make sure also that we have got assistance for regional recovery hubs, and there is \$16 million there, as well as additional regional and state coordination resourcing and those mental health supports. We have new opportunities in emerging industries, and this is where again Minister D'Ambrosio has talked I think at length about renewable energy and the transition to a mix of renewable energy sources, diversifying our economies to new sectors and industries. We know that, for example, where we can defray energy output – the desalination plant, for example, being able to offset its energy emissions through the purchasing of certificates with AGL – these are the sorts of things that are happening on the ground to address the issues that you are talking about.

Ellen SANDELL: I appreciate that. In terms of industry, you talk about diversification. Can you talk a bit more about that in terms of some industries are going to be hit much harder by climate change, some may become unviable, there might be new industries that we need to support now to lessen the impact?

Harriet SHING: We are supporting a range of industries affected by transition, whether that is a transition occurring in the face of and as a consequence of climate change, whether it is a range of transitions occurring because of market changes. We know, for example, coal-fired power investment has absolutely declined globally. That then leads itself to a transition.

Ellen SANDELL: I appreciate that. I guess I am just trying to get at: are we rising to the challenge of adaptation that is before us? And how can we better plan?

Harriet SHING: Through record investment. We are setting the pace across the nation around transition.

The CHAIR: Apologies, Ms Sandell, the time is up. I am going to go to Mr Hamer for the last 7 minutes.

Paul HAMER: Thank you, Minister. And thank you, officials. In your presentation one of the projects that you identified was the Geelong convention and exhibition centre –

Harriet SHING: Yes, brilliant.

Paul HAMER: and I was wondering if you could just give an update for where that project is at.

Danny O'BRIEN: 'Oh, what a surprise! I'm really excited to get a question about this!'

Harriet SHING: Do you know what, Mr O'Brien? Just because it is not in Gippsland does not mean that it is not excellent. I want to take this opportunity to thank you, Mr Hamer, for talking about the Geelong City Deal and the Geelong convention and exhibition centre. We are delivering on a really, really wonderful investment that will attract new visitors to the Geelong region for decades to come. It is a key project within the Geelong City Deal. We have invested more than \$260 million towards this project. That will create up to 600 jobs in construction and then around 270 jobs when it is complete. There will be a 200-room luxury hotel with commercial spaces and a 1000-seat plenary venue.

When we think also about the impact that this will have on showcasing regional Victoria to the world ahead of the Commonwealth Games in 2026, we can see how this fits really neatly with the partnerships that have been developed and delivered through all levels of government. And when this final design goes through compliance and it is ensured that we have a very, very clear focus on traditional owner engagement, on inclusion, on accessibility and on a welcoming space that does provide opportunities for everyone, we will see that that builds on everything we are trying to achieve across the state. This is about development of infrastructure that is fair, that creates jobs, that delivers a legacy and that also accommodates growth.

It is funded through the Geelong City Deal. That is valued at more than \$500 million, and that is a 10-year plan to revitalise Geelong and to make sure that critical infrastructure is delivered there too. We will be working, as I said, with all levels of government, and work is progressing really well on this project. We are on track to commence later this year on delivery of the hotel, and the convention and exhibition centre will be completed at the beginning of 2026, just in time for the Commonwealth Games. Preliminary site work began in 2022, at the start of last year, and we also conducted a number of heritage and cultural digs in partnership with Development Victoria and the Wadawurrung Traditional Owners Aboriginal Corporation.

We had a really comprehensive community and stakeholder engagement process, and we wanted to finalise in partnership with the community the project's objectives and inform the preparation of the request-for-proposal process. We had face-to-face and virtual sessions, and Engage Victoria was a big part of that. I was really delighted in August to announce three shortlisted PPP consortia that will be proceeding to the request-for-proposal process of the project, and these bidders include some of the most well-respected and experienced construction firms in Victoria. They are really going to ensure that this becomes and remains a really world-class public asset. That process closed on 30 March, and I am looking forward to being able to announce the successful consortia and proposed design later this year – a really, really exciting next chapter for Geelong and a wonderful collaborative effort in the planning and discussion about what vision it is that the community would like to see evolve.

Paul HAMER: Thanks, Minister. And you are right: it is very exciting for the city of Geelong and that whole region. Conventions are obviously very big business. They attract a lot of international tourists, and it is obviously near the Surf Coast and the Great Ocean Road. What do you see as some of the broader impacts of the delivery of this project?

Harriet SHING: This is about it being a tourism drawcard. It is also about economic and social and community-based prosperity. We know that where we do have the infrastructure in place, so a 200-room hotel, that we can facilitate the attraction of a range of convention and other activities, conferences and global events. This is part of showing off this beautiful part of the world and making sure that visitors are very, very well taken care of. It is about having access to well-appointed resources and facilities and making sure that people have high amenity value in the venues that they are accessing. Employment opportunities are really an

important part of this work as well, and as I said, 600 jobs during construction, 270 jobs once complete is also about good economic return on investment.

We have been really proud, as I said also, to walk with Wadawurrung traditional owners on the project, and setting targets for Indigenous employment and contracting during this build has been an important part of walking the talk on inclusion and on diversity.

It is a really important starting point and a starting place for the Great Ocean Road as well, and this gateway that we have to open people up to the tourism and visitor opportunities down the Great Ocean Road is really important. That is a series of projects that is also intended to deliver that stickiness, those opportunities for people to head to the region and spend time there and to spend money there and to bookend that, for example, with the Twelve Apostles development in that precinct and the visitor activation across the entire region.

Bev McArthur interjected.

The CHAIR: Mrs McArthur!

Paul HAMER: Thank you, Minister. I prefer that my question be heard without interruption. You mentioned the involvement of the traditional owners, and I think that is a really fantastic venture. I was just wondering if you could perhaps elaborate on how the traditional owners might be involved in other city deal projects, particularly the Geelong City Deal.

Harriet SHING: Partnerships are of vital importance, not just in projects like this but in projects of any volume as far as funding is concerned. When we talk about the importance of self-determination, when we talk about the whole-of-government approach to First Nations engagement, it has to be at the heart of every conversation we have. It deserves to be, and that is why we will continue that work across the board, including through the city deal.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister and department 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 now going to take a very short break before beginning the consideration of the portfolio of Commonwealth Games legacy at 3:45 pm or just shortly after. I declare this hearing adjourned.

Witnesses withdrew.