

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2024–25 Budget Estimates

Melbourne – Friday 24 May 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

Jaelyn Symes MLC, Minister for Emergency Services; and

Kate Houghton, Secretary,

Kate Fitzgerald, Deputy Secretary, Emergency Management, and

Corinne Cadilhac, Deputy Secretary, Corporate Services and Infrastructure, Department of Justice and Community Safety;

Rick Nugent, Emergency Management Commissioner, and

Jenni Rigby, Chief Executive, Emergency Management Victoria; and

Mariela Diaz, Chief Executive Officer, Emergency Recovery Victoria.

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

I ask that mobile telephones please be turned to silent.

On behalf of the Parliament, the committee is conducting this Inquiry into the 2024–25 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, any comments repeated outside of this hearing may not be protected by this privilege.

As Chair I expect that committee members will be respectful towards witnesses, the Victorian community joining the hearing via the live stream today 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 Emergency Services the Honourable Jaelyn Symes, as well as officials from DJCS. Minister, I am going to invite you to make an opening statement or presentation of no more than 5 minutes, after which time committee members will ask you some questions. Your time starts now.

Jaelyn SYMES: Thank you, Chair and committee members, and welcome, Mr McGowan – good to see you.

Nick McGOWAN: It is very good to see you, Minister.

Jaelyn SYMES: I would also like to begin this session by acknowledging the traditional owners of the lands and paying my deep personal respect to elders past, present and emerging and take the opportunity to acknowledge the key role that Aboriginal people play in disaster preparedness and recovery.

Visual presentation.

Jaelyn SYMES: I also want to mention that, conveniently, today's hearing is during volunteer week and that we are going to be spending a lot of the time talking about the enormous contribution that volunteers make in the emergency services space. We will also be talking about the investment that we continue to make in our emergency services and our volunteers, and this year's budget has over \$385 million invested in it, as you can see from the slide. covering a range of incredibly worthy investments.

It is my third year as Minister for Emergency Services presenting before PAEC, and it follows years of working closely with the emergency services sector as an MP for Northern Victoria, which, as you would appreciate, has seen its fair share of natural disasters. I am sure many of you have experienced, as it is often the way through disasters, we are very much reminded of how much we ask of our emergency service workers, firefighters and

especially our volunteers who protect us, our homes, our communities and our environment, but we always see they never hesitate to answer the call.

This year we are continuing backing – I ran up the stairs, sorry – our hardworking emergency workers and volunteer services with the support they need to do what they do best: protect and save lives. The 2024–25 budget provides \$6.95 million for VICSES volunteers to support core capability training and support programs, including incident management team training to ensure VICSES have sufficient accredited incident management staff. It also supports the leasing of certain facilities. And really positive news: both the CFA and VICSES have seen an increase in volunteers over the last year, and the agencies are on track to have more than 1200 more volunteers than they did last year.

I am particularly excited to see that there are a high number of new female recruits at both agencies, and it would be an opportune time to congratulate and welcome the new chairs – Jasmine Doak to the SES and Joanne Plummer to the CFA – as well as acknowledge the outgoing chair of both those organisations and acknowledge his knowledge and commitment in Greg Wilson.

Other popular supports are the volunteer emergency services equipment program and the Valuing Volunteers program. I recently announced the latest round of VESEP grants, and I can tell you brigades and units had their applications ready to go. It is a great, well-subscribed fund, and it is a way to complement the important contribution that the community makes by supporting volunteers through fundraising efforts, because the programs are two to one funded.

This year's budget delivers additions to both the CFA and FRV firefighting fleets. The CFA will receive \$18.6 million to add 15 primary response urban pumper appliances, and FRV will receive \$15.4 million for five new aerial pumper platform appliances. That expands FRV's capability to respond to fires and rescues that might be up to a height of 25 metres.

The storms, floods and fires over summer were incredibly devastating. We saw over a hundred homes destroyed and 4500 people impacted. Recovery and clean-up are of course ongoing, which just shows the scale of these significant events. This year's budget provides over \$300 million across government for recovery, building upon almost \$2.5 billion of support we have provided to communities following emergency events over the past two years. It is providing \$1.7 million for the continuation of temporary housing for flood-impacted people. There is \$24 million to continue statewide clean-up as well as the 1800 hotline. There is \$1.4 million for further regional coordination and continued clean-up for those that were impacted by the February bushfires and storms. Both clean-up programs are dealing with hundreds of registrations received.

We have seen over the last summer how important communication is in relation to responding to natural disasters, not only for the effective operation of the state control centre but important information for people impacted by those events to know what to do and when to act. So this year's budget, as you can see from the slide, makes critical investments to ensure that warning systems at the state control centre are supported and, as we discussed last year, continuation of the Triple Zero next CAD project.

The CHAIR: I am just going to stop you there, Minister. I am a ruthless timekeeper. Occasionally I do feel bad about it. Let us go to you, Mr O'Brien.

Danny O'BRIEN: Thank you, Chair. Good morning, Minister and team. Minister, the total budget for the emergency management capability on page 155 of BP3 is \$1729.2 million. Can you provide the total spending breakdown of this for VICSES, FRV, CFA, Triple Zero Victoria and LSV? I am happy for you to take it on notice if you do not have it there in front of you.

Jaelyn SYMES: Well, it might be easier – it is just that I have sort of got it spread across various bits of information, so by the time you watch me go through it it might be a bit annoying.

Danny O'BRIEN: Happy for you to do that. In 2021 the government promised 48 new heavy tankers for the CFA, with the full fleet, according to the government media release, to be 'operational in 2023'. How many of the 48 trucks have been delivered to the CFA brigades?

Jaelyn SYMES: In relation to the heavy tanker rollout, it was funded as part of \$126 million as part of the CFA capability package, and as you have identified, 48 heavy tankers were included in that announcement as

well as two light tankers. So far CFA has delivered 30 of those heavy tankers, and both of the light tankers have been delivered. There are different stages of commissioning for brigade use, or some of them are already in service – there can be operational readiness, some of them go through training before they are actually sort of handed over –

Danny O'BRIEN: So how many of the 30 are operational?

Jaclyn SYMES: Of the 30 tankers, 26 are now in service, and the other four are expected to be in service by the start of this fire season. The remaining 18 heavy tankers of the 48 will be progressively delivered to CFA with delivery expected by mid-year.

Danny O'BRIEN: To the CFA or to their brigades?

Kate FITZGERALD: To the CFA – then they undertake a short period of work, and then they are delivered out to the brigades.

Danny O'BRIEN: Right. The question was raised in Parliament earlier this year, and the government said the rollout was expected to be completed by June 2024. That is not going to be met, then.

Jaclyn SYMES: Well, end of June, July.

Kate FITZGERALD: Yes.

Danny O'BRIEN: Okay. I am not sure who this question might be for, perhaps for Ms Fitzgerald. Has any of the base capital fleet funding itemised in the budget been used in the more than a million dollars spent on six unused Mercedes-Benz 967 trucks that are now up for auction for less than half their purchase price, as reported in the *Herald Sun* this morning?

Jaclyn SYMES: I can respond to that because I have sought information directly from CFA, because as you would appreciate, Mr O'Brien, I do not decide what types of trucks CFA buy, nor do I negotiate the price that they pay for them.

Danny O'BRIEN: That is why I did not ask you the question.

Jaclyn SYMES: What I can confirm is that, despite what has been reported, the CFA did not pay anywhere near \$200,000 for these trucks. I understand that they negotiated a much lower price –

Danny O'BRIEN: How much?

Jaclyn SYMES: but that amount remains commercial in confidence. However, I have been advised that two of the trucks just sold at auction this morning for \$100,000.

Danny O'BRIEN: This morning?

Jaclyn SYMES: Yes.

Danny O'BRIEN: No doubt someone saw them in the paper and went, 'Hey, there's a bargain.'

Jaclyn SYMES: No, it was at auction. I do not know how the auctions work, but I think they were probably registered prior to this morning. But they have been sold.

In relation to this particular issue, I think some of the background is important, Mr O'Brien, because I am advised that the CFA purchased six Mercedes-Benz cab chassis in 2021. They were at a heavily reduced price, I am assured. They were going to use them to refurbish existing pumpers, and at the time they purchased them with an opportunity to partner with an interstate agency contract that would have allowed them to refurbish them as part of a job lot. The interstate agency, and I will not name them, subsequently advised the CFA –

Danny O'BRIEN: Why not?

Jaelyn SYMES: It is not for me to name them. We had a partnership with another state, and it has not come through because they were advised that they were not going to continue with their refurbishment program, so it impacted our ability to –

Danny O'BRIEN: Minister, commercial in confidence is something that I understand a fair bit of. It is about not doing over the state on a sale. You have just told us what they sold for this morning – \$100,000 – please tell us now what they were purchased for.

Jaelyn SYMES: Well, it might affect their ability to buy some in the future.

Danny O'BRIEN: Seriously?

Jaelyn SYMES: The advice I have received from the CFA –

Danny O'BRIEN: Well, I am going with \$200,000 unless you tell me otherwise what it is.

Jaelyn SYMES: It is nowhere near \$200,000.

Danny O'BRIEN: Well, tell me what it is, then.

Jaelyn SYMES: I am advised by the CFA directly that they got a good price.

Danny O'BRIEN: They sat there for three years and nothing happened with them. Are there any other trucks sitting around that are not being used, Minister?

Jaelyn SYMES: As you would appreciate, as I started my response to your question, I am not the fleet manager of any of our emergency services organisations.

Danny O'BRIEN: You are the minister responsible. That is the question I am asking.

Jaelyn SYMES: No vehicles of the way you have characterised them have been brought to my attention other than the ones we have just addressed, no.

Danny O'BRIEN: Okay. The figure that was raised in the paper this morning of \$200,000 was put to both the government and the CFA and neither of them disputed it. Are you now saying that that figure is incorrect?

Jaelyn SYMES: I have got the exact email that was apparently sent in a response to the media query that says they were purchased at a heavily reduced price. That is what went back to the journalist, I understood.

Danny O'BRIEN: Well, it is not disputed. Minister, given the –

Jaelyn SYMES: No, the CFA did dispute that they were not \$200,000, and I am confirming that they have provided me advice that they were not \$200,000 purchases.

Danny O'BRIEN: Minister, can you provide a full breakdown of the CFA fleet and vehicle ages – how many we have got and how old they all are? I am happy to take it on notice. I am sure you are not going to run through the 1900 trucks.

Jaelyn SYMES: There are a lot of them, and I have previously gone through a similar type of response in question time. There are more than 3000 vehicles. In relation to the information that I can get, I will take it on notice and provide what is easily available and –

Danny O'BRIEN: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. We will go to Mr Galea.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Chair. Good morning again, Minister, Secretary and other officials. Minister, you referenced in your presentation the disastrous events over summer – floods, fires and storms, including the 13 February storms. Budget paper 3, page 8, also outlines the whole-of-government funding for those events. Minister, can you talk to me about the government's response in a little bit more detail and what supports specifically the government provided the community with?

Jaelyn SYMES: Thank you, Mr Galea, and as you have indicated, pretty large impacts on a very broad area of our state, and lots and lots of people have been impacted. As I indicated in my presentation, recovery is a long journey, and it is something that we are committed to – supporting those communities. Importantly, we enable a community-led response to a lot of our efforts; they get better outcomes. I would take the opportunity to indeed acknowledge and thank the hundreds of emergency services and volunteers for their efforts over the summer period. Floods, fires, storms – it was like a bingo card of emergencies this summer. As we know, climate change is seeing more frequent and more intense events, and they are also becoming more difficult to predict. I think the commissioner and I were preparing in October and November for fires, and we did not really have floods as something that we thought was necessarily going to happen at that time of year, so we quickly had to change responses and preparedness in relation to responding to the changing weather and certainly acknowledge the bureau for their advice in that regard.

There were 29 local government areas affected by the 2023–24 flood and storm events. These emergencies unfortunately re-impacted communities that had previously been impacted by the 2022 flood event, so it really compounded the complexity of the recovery needs, hitting communities that were in recovery and obviously still significant amounts of trauma present. There were over 165 houses damaged or inundated and destroyed, and approximately 43 businesses and 52 council assets were inundated or damaged. Secondary impact assessments on damaged housing, businesses and infrastructure still continue today at a local level, because it is really important to understand in detail the impacts for a variety of reasons – insurance and our obligations with the federal government in relation to the support that we can provide. The February 2024 bushfires and storm event impacted 36 local government areas, and there were 96 homes that were destroyed or, if not, deemed uninhabitable.

The Victorian government partnered with the Commonwealth, local councils and communities to implement immediate relief and early recovery measures, and we are committed to supporting the communities, obviously continuing that support, because we really want them to get back on their feet, recover stronger and more resilient for the future. As we have indicated, these are communities that have been hit multiple times, so doing the very best to ensure that they are prepared for the next event is certainly something that is front of mind for both us and the community, and it was something that came through on the numerous visits that I made to the affected areas. The Premier came to a lot of those visits as well.

Access to information and communication is probably the priority for communities; that is what they all talk about in the immediate aftermath, so ensuring that we have got the ability for people to access information at their own time is really important, which is why having our streamlined 1800 Recovery hotline has been a really integral part of the response, because it is a dedicated service that is able to provide impacted households access to information about recovery support as well as navigating any other services that they may need. We have also got access to recovery support workers, importantly having mental and wellbeing support, financial counselling, legal support, information on all of the payments that are available, clean-up support and rebuild support, so a good opportunity to be able to get information. Once you have called you are allocated a caseworker so you are not having to continue to retell your story. They are just a number of the programs and funding streams that respond your question in relation to what we are doing to support recovery.

The clean-up program that supported impacted households is really important, because it undertakes all hazard assessments. It conducts what is called a make-safe program, which is dealing with hazardous material or making sure the electricity is not causing issues and things like that. Also, identifying demolition works for impacted uninsured residents has been an important role and supporting the removal of any debris around houses and the community.

Another funding stream for recovery that has been well received is the Council Support Fund, so designed to support impacted councils with their clean-up responsibility and restoring of community assets, facilities and services. One of the things that the community really respond to is having their community assets repaired as quickly as possible. It is good for wellbeing and a sense that things are able to get back to normal. Simple things like walking tracks and kids parks and things like that – the sooner those things are repaired, the better for the wellbeing of community. The recovery support program is another program. It is available to people affected by the storm and flood event of December and January and includes payments and services that support their recovery – advice and assistance. One of the major issues after these events is insurance complications, so ensuring that people are given advice and support in relation to those challenges is really important and, again, picking up on some of those mental health and wellbeing services. Following the February –

The CHAIR: Apologies, Minister. We are going to go straight back to Mr O'Brien.

Danny O'BRIEN: Thank you, Chair. Minister, the budget papers indicate \$160 million will be raised from the increased five services levy. Can you provide a full breakdown of how that money will be spent?

Jaelyn SYMES: Mr O'Brien, I will go through the fire services property levy in the detail as it purports to my portfolio. But as you would appreciate, it is actually the remit of the Treasurer. But I do not want to be particularly cute in that regard, so I do want to –

Danny O'BRIEN: No, given that 100 per cent of the revenue goes to the fire services.

Jaelyn SYMES: Yes, I am getting there. I am just explaining that it is not the responsibility of the Minister for Emergency Services per se. It is a fund that helps support firefighting efforts in Victoria so that it supports services –

Danny O'BRIEN: Thank you, Minister. I know what it is. I just wanted to know if you can give me a breakdown of where it will all go.

Jaelyn SYMES: The levy can be used to fund 77.5 per cent of the agreed budget of the CFA and 84.5 per cent of the agreed budget of FRV.

Danny O'BRIEN: Yes, I understand that. Can you not tell me how it will actually be spent, or will it just go to operational?

Jaelyn SYMES: What I can tell you is that, as I have indicated, it does not fund the entire fire efforts in Victoria each year. The Victorian government spends significantly more on fire services –

Danny O'BRIEN: I do not come here to ask questions about what something does not fund, Minister, with respect. Can you tell me what percentage of the levy will go towards funding FRV overtime costs?

Jaelyn SYMES: Mr O'Brien, each year the contribution that the state makes to our fire services covers a range of costs. So equipment, firefighters, staff, volunteers, training, infrastructure, community education – all of that is paid for through consolidated revenue, which is supplemented by the levy. As I have indicated, the legislative provision provides for up to 87.5 per cent of FRV's budget.

Danny O'BRIEN: Okay. Can I ask: what percentage of the levy will go towards funding the new FRV EBA? Or perhaps a better way of asking it –

Jaelyn SYMES: Well, I would like there to be a FRV new EBA.

Danny O'BRIEN: Perhaps given your answer, what is the likely cost of the FRV EBA?

Jaelyn SYMES: We do not have an agreed new EBA yet.

Danny O'BRIEN: When do you expect to have one?

Jaelyn SYMES: It is now out of my hands because it is at Fair Work.

Danny O'BRIEN: Yes, but is there a timeframe on that?

Kate FITZGERALD: At the moment in relation to the FRV operational agreement the UFU has sought a judicial review in relation to decisions that the Fair Work Commission have made around agreed terms. That judicial review is scheduled in the Federal Court of Fair Work in August 2024. Following the outcomes of that judicial review, then it would return to the Fair Work Commission to arbitrate on the intractable bargaining workplace determination.

Danny O'BRIEN: Okay. Thank you. I am not sure whether this might be a question for you as well, Ms Fitzgerald, but how many firefighters are currently unable to perform their full duties due to the ongoing COVID-19 vaccine mandate with FRV?

Kate FITZGERALD: I can seek advice on those numbers, but essentially, as you are well aware, the FRV has had vaccination requirements in place for FRV firefighters for some time.

Danny O'BRIEN: Why are they still there? Every other vaccine mandate was dropped two years ago virtually.

Kate FITZGERALD: One of the key reasons in relation to this is in relation to the work that FRV do on emergency medical responses, and to provide you with an indication of the number of incidents they attend, from 1 July 2023 to 31 March 2024 FRV attended 3043 EMR response incidents. All of their firefighters are required to be trained within EMR, and FRV has taken the view that it is important for their firefighters, to ensure that they have COVID vaccination requirements that are consistent with health workplace settings.

Danny O'BRIEN: Minister, there was \$15 million promised in the budget last year on the VICSES fleet. None of it has been spent. We have got SES volunteers being given second-hand uniforms, we are hearing now, because the government or the SES cannot afford new ones. They are fundraising to pay for their own fuel. What is the government doing to meet the funding shortfall for the SES?

Jaelyn SYMES: Well, as I have run through in my presentation, Mr O'Brien, the VICSES volunteers are amazing. I have seen so many of them responding to events since I have been in the portfolio. They were very visible on Wednesday, with a lot of activities around the state –

Danny O'BRIEN: We all love them, Minister, and that is not the question. The question is: where is the money for them?

Jaelyn SYMES: This year's budget includes \$7 million for VICSES to deliver volunteer training, incident management team training and volunteer support programs. As you identified, the budget of \$15 million for 35 heavy rescue trucks included 21 heavy rescue trucks and seven medium rescue trucks funded last year.

Danny O'BRIEN: They were funded but nothing happened with it. Why is that? Budget papers show that none of that money was spent last year.

Jaelyn SYMES: I can get you an update.

Kate FITZGERALD: I can talk to that if you like, Minister. The VICSES have taken significant works in relation to the rollout of the 35 heavy rescue trucks that were funded in the 2023–24 budget. That has included that they have engaged the appropriate sort of procurement arrangements to be able to do that. They have forward-ordered cab chassis of the vehicles and truck parts. They expect to see these start to arrive this calendar year, in 2024, with the entire program to be closed out by 2026–27, and that will assist with the rollout obviously of the heavy rescue trucks.

Danny O'BRIEN: Ms Fitzgerald, could I ask for a breakdown of the VICSES fleet and vehicle ages, as I did with the CFA?

The CHAIR: Mr O'Brien, the time is up.

Danny O'BRIEN: Sorry, did you not let the minister finish her sentence when she was giving her presentation?

The CHAIR: I did. I am keeping to time. Thank you, Mr O'Brien. We will be coming back this way. We will be coming back your way.

Danny O'BRIEN: You are being biased in your management of the committee. You are. How can you not let me finish asking a question?

The CHAIR: Mr O'Brien, we are moving on. Yes, Deputy Chair, on a point of order.

Nick McGOWAN: On a point of order, the member raises a fair point. That is, all he is asking for is to be treated in the same way that ministers are and that the question he asked be afforded the opportunity to have an answer.

Mathew HILAKARI: On the point of order, there has been some latitude in recent times, but we have been consistent – once the time stops, the conversation stops and we move to the next question.

Danny O'BRIEN: Literally you let the minister go for another 20 or 30 seconds.

Mathew HILAKARI: We have had some latitude this morning.

Danny O'BRIEN: For the government, Mr Hilakari.

Mathew HILAKARI: For both.

Danny O'BRIEN: For the government, not for the people who are actually holding this government to account.

The CHAIR: Excuse me, Mr O'Brien, enough of the grandstanding.

Danny O'BRIEN: Chair, it is not grandstanding. I find that offensive, frankly. We are here to hold the government to account, and you are continually shutting us down.

The CHAIR: We are moving forward, Mr O'Brien.

Danny O'BRIEN: You could not care less about transparency, you lot. All I am asking for is for the average age of the VICSES fleet. It is not a state secret. It is a pretty simple question to ask. I would appreciate if the government would take it on notice.

The CHAIR: Mr O'Brien, we are coming back to you and your question in a moment, after Mr Tak. You can settle down. On the point of order, there is no point of order. We are going to move forward.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you, Chair, Minister and officials. Minister, I would like to take you to supporting our volunteers. I refer to budget paper 3, page 66. The budget supports our emergency service volunteers in many ways that you have already outlined. Minister, would you be able to tell the committee how this investment will encourage volunteer recruitment and upskilling.

Jaclyn SYMES: Yes. Thank you, Mr Tak. Supporting volunteers is one of the best parts of the job that I have the privilege of holding. We are investing in training and programs to create safer, more inclusive and more diverse workplaces, and ES venues. It is part of our commitment to support volunteers in this space. It is also part of our plan to increase volunteer numbers. As I alluded to in my presentation, there has been some really positive interest from new people being attracted to both the CFA and the SES, and that is great to see. They are great organisations to be part of, so anybody that has got time to volunteer, it is certainly a direction that I point people to. I know it is a very rewarding contribution that you can make to your community.

The CFA's responsibility is for emergency management response across obviously rural and regional Victoria. They put their lives on the line to protect others, property and more than 4 million people. CFA has 1211 volunteer brigades and over 51,000 volunteers at the moment. VICSES carries the broadest multicontrol responsibilities in the Victorian emergency management sector, because they are the control agency for some of the emergencies that we have been reflecting on before in relation to Mr Galea's question about recovery. They are there to support people and property and communities that have been subjected to flood, storm, tsunami, earthquake and landslide. I hope I am not doing any premonitions here, but there are a lot of incidents that SES turn out for. They provide assistance to other ESOs and they also have a dedicated workforce that includes a paid workforce. There are around 5000 volunteer and paid SES personnel. Obviously they operate 24/7. There is no 'daylight hours only' for emergencies, unfortunately. This year's funding provides money for VICSES to support training for volunteers and that important role of upskilling incident management team training, and there are some volunteer support programs that will be continued under this year's funding allocation.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you, Minister. In terms of talking about diversity in the CFA, I note that in the questionnaire the proportion of CFA's female operational members is continuing to increase. Minister, could you explain how the government is supporting more women to volunteer for the CFA?

Jaclyn SYMES: Yes. Thank you, Mr Tak. I am pleased to say that I meet more and more women in this space getting involved in the emergency services, and particularly CFA have made it a focus of their

organisation to improve gender diversity in their brigades. There is a CFA women's advisory committee that have really been spearheading ways to increase women's participation. Both the CEO Natalie MacDonald and chief fire officer Jason Heffernan have been instrumental in setting up and supporting that committee – not only supporting the committee but taking on board and implementing the recommendations that they make. An example of that has been women-only training sessions. I had the opportunity to go along and attend one, and it was a really great opportunity to meet some passionate women who are also encouraging other women to come along. There were a couple of mother–daughter duos as well, which was great to see.

They have also implemented, off the back of recommendations from this group, peer support for women captains. They are also identifying where appropriate facilities need upgrading for women and also making sure that their voices are heard in the design and rollout of uniforms. Since the 2022–23 budget we have been delivering a range of gender improvements for brigades around the state. We have had a lot of construction underway, including new women's toilets at 21 fire stations where they did not have those facilities, upgrading amenities at 20 fire stations and the construction of new facilities at three of the Victorian emergency management training campuses. A further 17 sites have been identified for facility upgrades. That has all been funded from the CFA capability funding package. Also, many brigades put this as a priority for their VESEP grant applications. I certainly want to reassure the committee that all of the new stations that we commit to certainly have facilities dedicated for women to encourage increased diversity in each and every part of the state.

There was also funding for CFA last year to run their recruitment campaign Give Us a Hand, and it was certainly well received by many in the community and saw the opportunity to really target women and encourage them into operational roles, which is something that if you come and have a look, you are able to do. So I would encourage any women that are interested to get along to their local brigade and see what they can do.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you, Minister.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. We are going to go straight to the Deputy Chair.

Nick McGOWAN: Lucky last. How are you?

Jaelyn SYMES: I am good.

Nick McGOWAN: Awesome. I will pick up, I think, where my colleague left off. Secretary, if I may, can we ask for a breakdown of the VICSES fleet and the vehicle ages?

Kate HOUGHTON: I am not sure we have the data for that obviously at hand. In terms of trying to source it, I am not sure if that is possible, but we will take that on notice if that is possible.

Nick McGOWAN: That would be most welcome. Thank you. Minister, to date I do not believe the IGEM's review of Victoria's water safety arrangements has been released. Am I correct in saying that? I think it was given to you in August of last year, if memory serves correct.

Jaelyn SYMES: It has been received by government for consultation, and I will receive briefings in due course and of course make that public.

Nick McGOWAN: When you say 'government', does that mean you have received it, or does it mean the Premier's office?

Jaelyn SYMES: It is with the department.

Nick McGOWAN: So you have not yet received it from the department.

Jaelyn SYMES: Some of my advisers may have access to it, but I have not received a briefing in relation to it.

Nick McGOWAN: Could your advisers provide me with a copy of that?

Jaelyn SYMES: Once I have –

Nick McGOWAN: Once you have looked at it?

Jaelyn SYMES: Yes. When I –

Nick McGOWAN: Next week?

Jaelyn SYMES: What is the timing on it? Sorry. We are continuing to work with stakeholders on the response, so I am more than happy to give you a copy when it is public.

Nick McGOWAN: Okay. Not next week?

Jaelyn SYMES: Let me have a look at it first.

Nick McGOWAN: Okay. Awesome. I am happy to assist where I can assist, Minister. I know last year we spoke about the dispatch system for Triple Zero, and at that stage they were in the midst of going out for a delivery partner. Do you know where that has progressed to at this point?

Jaelyn SYMES: Yes – really positive progress, Mr McGowan. We know the importance of this CAD upgrade. We want to make sure that the workforce are supported by the latest technology that the community can be confident of and supports their important work. Commercial arrangements are close to being finalised but are not yet, so as such, I am not yet in a position to disclose the total estimated investment of the CAD. You would appreciate when it is in the final throes of contractual negotiations and finalisations, it is not appropriate for me to provide much information, but it is very close. A preferred provider will be announced very soon, and I am more than happy to disclose the investment at that time.

Nick McGOWAN: I am glad for that. Thank you, Minister. I am just looking back to all the records from last year, Ms Fitzgerald, and this is what you said last year:

ESTA, as recently as last week –
this is a year ago, of course –

have now gone out to market to bring on a delivery partner –
which we have talked about –

for the delivery of the next-generation CAD system ...
as you have talked about, Minister –

That is the first stage within their procurement process, and that tender will run for – I think it is a period of six to eight weeks. But they have stepped now into the tender arrangement in relation to that, so they are on track in terms of being able to deliver the next-gen CAD.

Now, that was a year ago. We were six or eight weeks away from the delivery partner being formed. Why are we heading into a year later and still no closer, it would appear – or am I wrong, or are we all wrong?

Kate FITZGERALD: The delivery partner is the first stage of bringing on a delivery partner, which really helps Triple Zero Victoria to establish the project and the delivery of next-gen CAD. The next stage of the process, which the minister just outlined, is in relation to the vendor. That is actually in relation to the platform itself, and those aspects of the commercial procurement arrangements are currently occurring now, which is in relation to the vendor for the delivery of next-gen CAD, the platform.

Nick McGOWAN: So what you are saying is you have chosen the vendor. That was done last year.

Jaelyn SYMES: No.

Kate FITZGERALD: No, the delivery partner.

Nick McGOWAN: Would it be fair to say there has been quite a delay in this? I am not sure why a year ago you were saying it takes another six to eight weeks before we decide on our delivery partner, and now it is a year later and we are still deciding.

Jaelyn SYMES: It is on track.

Kate FITZGERALD: It is on track.

Nick McGOWAN: What track?

Kate FITZGERALD: I appreciate it is complex. They are meeting their delivery timeframes in relation to next-gen CAD. I appreciate it is complex, but the delivery partner establishes and manages the project of work required to deliver next-gen CAD. That piece of procurement has occurred, which is what I briefed you on last year. The next stage is the delivery partner assisting Triple Zero Victoria to go to market to select a vendor to deliver the platform, the technical platform.

Nick McGOWAN: I understand that, Ms Fitzgerald. Again from you from last year, and this is quoting you in response to my question in terms of the implementation of the new system and when, you said:

That will be defined. I mean, as you can imagine, the initial work in terms of being able to work with the emergency services agencies to identify the scope and requirements is quite significant, and that is really ESTA's focus for the first sort of six to eight months of the program.

Well, we are well past that. I just feel like we are just not getting anywhere.

Kate FITZGERALD: There have been undertakings.

Jaelyn SYMES: That has been done.

Kate FITZGERALD: They have been undertaking that work with the emergency services agencies and the department, and that has informed how they are going to market in relation to the selection of a vendor for the delivery of the IT platform.

Nick McGOWAN: Okay, thank you. Minister, on the FRV, I can see here from some of the statistics they were not able to meet their target response time – that is, 90 per cent for structural fires – in 2022. The actual was 83.7 per cent. There was some discussion within the department. I know there was a document released in respect to whether this was as a consequence of the cyber attack that occurred. Are you able to shed any light on that and whether in fact the paper operation that had to occur after the cyber attack has now ceased entirely and we are back up and running? So you resorted to using pen and paper because of a cyber attack on FRV's system.

The CHAIR: Apologies, Mr McGowan.

Jaelyn SYMES: I will get you an answer.

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

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you, Chair, Minister, officials. I want to talk about the fleet as well. I can see on budget paper 3, page 71, there is information around fleet provision. Can you please explain how the government is supporting CFA and FRV through upgrades to their fleet?

Jaelyn SYMES: Yes, thank you, Ms Kathage. As you would appreciate, all of our hardworking firefighters, both paid and volunteer, are always interested in fleet investment, and delivery of new trucks to brigades is –

Lauren KATHAGE: Can I tell you there was actually a viewing party in Wallan recently for the heavy tanker. My father-in-law, as ex-captain, went down to the station. Everyone was very excited to go and have a look and check it out – kick the tyres, I think.

Jaelyn SYMES: Yes, new kit always attracts interest and generates excitement within brigades, but also it is a good opportunity to promote the work of brigades in their communities. I know when I travel around the state and do the official handover of trucks involving, basically, passing on keys – which may or may not be the ones that drive the trucks, depending on what you use for the photo-op – there is always a lot of interest and excitement for a lot of the community as well, and it often generates interest from new volunteers.

I am very pleased that we have had further investment in this year's budget. As I think previous members have touched on, there is constantly new fleet rolling out from previous budgets, and this budget is no different in relation to further investment for future new trucks and to add to the fleet of our firefighters. This year's budget

has \$15.4 million for FRV for five new aerial pumper platforms, which, despite their name, do not fly. They have the ability to assist with fires up to a height of 25 metres, which one of my staff tells me is about the height of Parliament, so a massive increase on their current capacity and ability to respond to some tricky fires that might be at height. There is also \$16.8 million for CFA for 15 new primary urban response vehicle pumpers. That is more of your urban response, which is basically your structural and community support, as opposed to bushfire-type trucks. I learn something new about each truck when I go and visit a brigade as well in terms of the different capabilities, their different uses and the different training requirements from volunteers to not only be able to drive but operate and respond appropriately. Each and every fleet and update and investment is always informed by the user experience of our volunteers, and there is particularly a huge focus on their safety – so the new fit-outs in relation to rollover protections. Just the basic comfort of not having to sit on the back of a truck in an unsafe way but being in a double cab and things like that is some of the feedback that I get back from volunteers in relation to the new vehicles as they come out and how they have adapted and responded to their needs. So investment in this year's fleet is something that I am particularly proud of. As I have said, there is continuing rollout of previous investments, and they are on track for delivery in various parts around the state.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you. And that is right, you do always learn more each time you go. I went with my daughter to the Whittlesea brigade with her Scout group, and I actually learned a lot of new facts I had not picked up there.

I would like to move on to Triple Zero Victoria, if I could please, Minister. Page 152 of budget paper 3 talks to the emergency management capability. We have got \$1.7 billion there, which is a big number – it is a huge number, actually. Can you explain there, with the \$333 million for the ESTA reform package, what is included in that expenditure that has been delivered?

Jaelyn SYMES: Yes, look, we have obviously had a lot of opportunity to talk about ESTA in the past. I am pleased to say that they are now Triple Zero Victoria, which has quickly become an acronym that rolls off the tongue, as TZV. They are an amazing workforce that –

A member: Repeat it again for me, Minister; I am a bit slow.

Jaelyn SYMES: TZV.

A member: I am going to struggle with that.

Jaelyn SYMES: Practise! It rolls – I objected at the start as well; now it is just a thing. So Triple Zero Victoria – look, an amazing organisation that we have been proud to support. They obviously were exposed to an enormous amount of pressure during the pandemic. It exposed issues that government needed to respond to, and they have certainly taken on that challenge and gone from strength to strength. It is an organisation that now has a boost of more trainers and team leaders. They have built better support and surge capability for busy times, and they have provided really important wellbeing support. As you would appreciate, you get exposed to some pretty harrowing incidents with people experiencing traumatic incidents, and you are the first person that they are speaking to, so ensuring that we have that support for the frontline staff is just vital. The funding meant that we could employ many more staff. TZV have employed 217 new FTE, including 127 new frontline operational call-taking and dispatch individuals, and that includes 79 for ambulance, 21 in fire and 27 in police. As Mr McGowan has indicated, there is also the investment that is contributing to the delivery of the next generation computer-aided dispatch system, which will really help that workforce do what they do, and do best, and that is connect community with our emergency services as quickly as possible.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. We will go straight to Mr Puglielli.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Chair. Good morning – nearly afternoon. I see a range of different funding measures with regard to emergency services in the budget. I see there is funding to transition short-term Forest Fire Management Victoria firefighter roles to full-time roles. I understand that some of the other states, like New South Wales and Queensland, fund volunteer remote area firefighting teams – RAFTs, I think they are called – which are basically low-cost ways of giving people living in urban areas training and the opportunity to fill in some gaps and fight small bushfires before they turn into big bushfires. I understand there is a proposal for a version that would have them work within the CFA, but then assist FFMV crews in first-strike deployment. Is there a reason we do not have something like that in Victoria?

Jaelyn SYMES: Thank you for your question, Mr Puglielli. I am aware of some representations that make suggestions in this regard, and I am certainly not opposed to the consideration of it. Predominantly it comes from my electorate and individuals that I have come across – really community-minded people who already volunteer in a range of ways. The specifics of your question in relation to forest fire management really sits with DEECA, so any sort of consideration of a formal proposal would involve Minister Dimopoulos and me. We do not currently have one, but I am, as I said, aware of some of the advocacy about individuals wanting to do volunteer service with those particular skills, and it is something that if we were to advance, would heavily involve the views of DEECA and FFMVic.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. I appreciate that clarification. So if I were to ask you, for example, if there is a funding issue or a timing issue as to why we do not have remote area firefighting teams – like those in the other states – in Victoria, would you be able to answer that?

Jaelyn SYMES: I think that is probably better directed to DEECA.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay.

Jaelyn SYMES: But there would be a range of considerations – and again I am probably outside my lane a bit here – that go beyond just funding. That would be safety, training and gaps. FFMVic, the ‘green jolly jumpers’, as a lot of the other ESOs call them, have an enormous footprint that they are responsible for, so any complementary services would be something we would certainly seek the views of that organisation on.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Sure. Again, feel free to let me know if this is coming out of scope: to your understanding, are there any barriers to people living in our cities helping with broader firefighting efforts across the state? If so, are there steps that you are taking to bridge that?

Jaelyn SYMES: Do you mean volunteers?

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Yes. Like, are there regulations in place that would prevent them from engaging in that kind of work? Is there any barrier that you could think of that the government could work to overcome?

Jaelyn SYMES: No, I do not think so. I guess what I would point to is that the CFA, although in rural and regional Victoria they are very familiar with bushfires, often have a great relationship with their more urban-based brigades and that is where a lot of the surge capacity comes from in relation to campaign events and the like. So there is certainly no obvious barrier apart from distance and the availability. Obviously our new emergency management commissioner has spent a lot of his time getting around the state and talking to people, so do you want to add anything?

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Do you have anything you would like to add?

Rick NUGENT: Thanks, Minister. In fact in the recent fire season – it was not just fire but storms and floods – we regularly had volunteers from metro areas up assisting, particularly in the Grampians area, during the fire. They deploy from less-risk areas to the high-risk areas. We had catastrophic conditions and extreme conditions, so we did have volunteers there. There are also additional programs that support metro volunteers in other areas. For example, in Mallacoota they have a Vols on Hols – volunteers on holidays – program, where people who are volunteers elsewhere in the state who holiday in Mallacoota then sign up so they are available in the event of a fire down there. There is no barrier to that, and in actual fact we regularly have people from metro supporting rural.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. Can I ask maybe more broadly: how are Victoria’s emergency services incorporating the impacts of climate change specifically into their planning budgets and operations?

Rick NUGENT: So constantly –

Jaelyn SYMES: We spend a lot of time talking about this, so we are deciding who – you go first.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: I can imagine.

Rick NUGENT: Yes, that is right. In all of the planning and preparation that is underway it is constantly assessing the operating environment and the weather – we get regular briefings. So the planning and

preparation in Victoria is all agencies, all hazards and constantly assessing, reassessing, planning and preparing for all types of emergencies. We saw that essentially play out over the last summer period, where from October through to March really we were constantly responding to events from fires that turned into storms and floods. In Briagolong in Gippsland, for example, there were three fires burning: the Rawson fire, Briagolong fire and Loch Sport fires. Then almost overnight we had 150 millimetres of rain; we had flash flooding and so on occurring. The preparation and planning we do is taking into account the cumulative and concurrent emergencies that we are seeing.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. Minister, with respect to the SES, in what way, in your view, has the government's long-term approach to SES's funding accounted for increasing risks from climate disasters?

Jaelyn SYMES: Continual investment in SES is something that is demonstrated year in, year out. There is obviously base funding, there is investment in facilities, there is investment in equipment. But what has come out and been shown is that when incidents happen, we go and get a Treasurer's advance to respond to things that come to pass, so things that we do not predict in the budget – because, as you have identified, it is hard to know when you are going to have a flood or a storm. We respond with both volunteers and resources, but the financial requests can come on top of that, and we have shown that we have done that through Treasurer's advances.

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

Mathew HILAKARI: Thank you, Minister and everybody, for your attendance today. I am just hoping to take us to the Triple Zero Victoria board. I am just hoping to understand how this is structured and what they will be responsible for.

Jaelyn SYMES: Thank you, Mr Hilakari. As we were reflecting on earlier, ESTA is now Triple Zero Victoria, and that was a consequence of legislative reform, which was informed by a review from Graham Ashton and a review from the IGEM into the operations of the organisation to ensure that we could modernise and support that organisation to be the best it can be for the benefit of Victorians. The purpose of the board being established was to strengthen governance and reporting lines. The functions of the governing board were mentioned and enshrined in the legislation, the *Triple Zero Victoria Act*, ensuring that the board would build and develop relationships with emergency services and health organisations. Some of the feedback, particularly from the Ashton review, was that there was a bit of a disconnect and a bit of a master-servant relationship rather than really recognising and acknowledging that Triple Zero Victoria is an emergency services organisation in its own right – 'the point of the spear', I think, is a term that is often used. But they are the front line of the front line, and to be recognised and develop those relationships with their partner agencies has been really important.

The board is also to establish a sustainable organisational framework for the organisation and ensure that TZV implements the work program to deliver its role in the statewide strategic action plan, which the commissioner sort of touched on in relation to making sure that we are constantly updating our whole-of-government preparedness at a station and responses to all emergencies that we can imagine. The board is also responsible for managing any risks that may affect TZV's ability to deliver services – really being able to make sure we are on top of any issues before they become problems – so that will be a role that they have.

The Bill also introduced a new requirement for the board to prepare strategic plans covering a three- to five-year period addressing, again, concerns that were identified by the IGEM and Ashton reviews, and really just making sure that we have the best structures in place. There have always been good people at ESTA and TZV – absolutely. This is not about reflecting on people's efforts. It is ensuring that the system – the governance arrangements – is modernised and supports an organisation such as TZV in the best possible way.

Mathew HILAKARI: That Ashton review, which you mentioned, and the IGEM review – the funding that we provide in this budget will support the implementation of those reviews?

Jaelyn SYMES: From those reviews, I am pleased to say, almost all the recommendations have been implemented. The Ashton review delivered 20 recommendations, and the IGEM made eight. So part of the budget allocation in the previous year was in response to those, but a lot of them are built into ordinary funding and what hopefully has become BAU –

Mathew HILAKARI: And multiyear planning.

Jaelyn SYMES: and multiyear support, that is right. All 28 recommendations have been commenced and implemented across the organisation – all well underway.

Mathew HILAKARI: Fantastic, the record has been corrected.

Jaelyn SYMES: But the majority of them will be completed by the end of this year, and to date the IGEM has confirmed that two recommendations were completed in December 2023 – one from the capability and services review and one from the IGEM review – so as you would appreciate there has been quite a lot of effort put into making sure we set this organisation up for the future, and I thank those people that have been involved in that important work to support the team at TZV.

Mathew HILAKARI: I am going to go to a different topic now, which is around information and the emergency management information and warning systems, because I think, in any emergency, having up-to-date information, whether it is for the community or the emergency services, is just incredibly important to making good decisions. It is budget paper 3, page 66, which goes to that funding. I am hoping that you can just talk to how we will get the most up-to-date information through these investments.

Jaelyn SYMES: Look, you are exactly right, Mr Hilakari, that the community's confidence and ability to safely respond to emergencies relies on not only the accuracy of the information but the ability to receive it, and that is where our warning systems are just so important. I have got to say, it is all active at the State Control Centre, but I particularly like to – I try not to get in the way – watch the whole unit that is devoted to community messaging, which is informed by all of the other roles in there, but really makes sure that the polygons – what you learn – the areas that are in play for wanting to make sure people get that message, and they are asked to act, respond, be alert et cetera. All of that is supported by a team, and it is making sure that we get the right messages and the right type of language as well. We learn, each and every event, about how we can improve that messaging, because you obviously get a lot of feedback from people that have been in receipt of that. In relation to this year's budget we are certainly wanting to build on that. The emergency management sector for information relies on two essential information and community technology systems – that is the emergency management common operating picture, which is EM-COP –

Mathew HILAKARI: A new one! That is a new one for us here.

Jaelyn SYMES: The acronyms in ES are next level. But also the VicEmergency website and alert system is something that I think everyone would be familiar with, and if you have not downloaded it, please do so.

Mathew HILAKARI: I definitely have.

Jaelyn SYMES: We are out of time, but I could talk more and more.

Mathew HILAKARI: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister.

Minister and officials, thank you very much for taking the time to appear before the committee this morning. 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 break before beginning its consideration of the corrections portfolio at 12:30 pm.

I declare this hearing adjourned.

Witnesses withdrew.