

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2023–24 Financial and Performance Outcomes

Melbourne – Monday 18 November 2024

MEMBERS

Sarah Connolly – Chair

Nicholas McGowan – Deputy Chair

Michael Galea

Mathew Hilakari

Lauren Kathage

Bev McArthur

Danny O’Brien

Aiv Puglielli

Meng Heang Tak

WITNESSES

Trish Burrows, Secretary, Department of Parliamentary Services;

Bridget Noonan, Clerk, Legislative Assembly; and

Robert McDonald, Clerk, and

Anne Sargent, Deputy Clerk, Legislative Council.

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 Financial and Performance Outcomes. Its aim is to gauge what the government achieved in 2023–24 compared to what the government planned to achieve.

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

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

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

I welcome the Secretary of Parliamentary Services Ms Trish Burrows and clerks from the Legislative Assembly and Legislative Council. Secretary, I am going to ask you to make an opening statement or presentation of no more than 10 minutes, after which time members will ask you just a couple of questions.

Trish BURROWS: Thank you. We are going to share the presentation across the three departments, so Robert is going to kick off.

Visual presentation.

Robert McDONALD: Thank you for inviting us to appear before you today. I will just start with the first slide that basically breaks down the funding that goes to the three parliamentary departments. Obviously, as well as the actual funding that the departments themselves spend, there are a number of other budgets, such as members-administered budgets and also members payroll, that are also administered by the parliamentary departments, but obviously we do not decide the amount and the quantity of those.

In terms of some of the highlights from the previous 12 months for my department, the Department of the Legislative Council, the main one was the Legislative Council regional sitting. It was quite a logistical exercise, and for those members that were present, they would have seen it in action. It was held on 18 April at the Echuca Library. It was quite a good day. Members had the opportunity to contribute to a range of debates during the sitting. As well as having a welcome to country at the start of the day, there were a number of other activities that were held on the day such as the farmers market. In addition to the actual sitting, there were a number of community engagement programs that we did run, which I think Anne might just cover off a little bit on.

Anne SARGENT: Thanks, Robert. We had a number of young people and members attend youth forums in Shepparton and Kyabram, which were held in the days leading up to the regional sitting. That went really well, plus the young people speaking on the floor of the house. Tara was from Rochester, from the floods area, and Cameron was from Echuca itself, and they spoke very well about their challenges due to the floods. Then we had a program where we went out to some schools and participated. We had 57 students get involved from six different schools. It was very much about some of the smaller schools that we went and saw. We also had some committee hearings in the lead-up and the day after in the area as well, and we also did quite a lot of social media work not only in the lead-up but also on the day and following all the various things that we had done throughout the week, basically.

Bridget NOONAN: Thanks, colleagues. It is my opportunity now to talk a little bit about the work in school and student engagement. There is certainly more detail in the Department of the Legislative Assembly's annual report, but some highlights have come through the tours program. Those of us who are used to being here principally on sitting days, if you turn up on a non-sitting day, you will see that there is a hive of activity, of tour activity, and there are some figures there of the numbers who have come through the building. I particularly draw members' attention to the outreach work that the tours team does, visiting schools and regional locations, and the coordination of the Parliament Prize this year, which I know various members were involved in as well in promoting that in your communities. To have over 1000 students enter the Parliament Prize was really quite a wonderful experience for us and for the students.

The community engagement team, which is a shared resource between the three parliamentary departments, puts a great focus on tertiary education and teacher engagement, so teach the teachers, because we cannot get to all students in Victoria, as lovely as that would be. Some of you were around this morning for the graduation ceremony for the parliamentary interns, which is a terrific program that we are very proud of, and we thank members for their participation in that, and some, as I said, real focus on teacher workshops to ensure that they are able to feel equipped to deliver civics education in a meaningful way.

Trish BURROWS: Thanks, members. A little bit of information about the work that goes to support you all and electorate officers as well. In 2023–24 we had 261 electorate officers recruited. It is a very high-volume part of the work for DPS in supporting electorate officers. It is the largest cohort of employees that we support. We continue to try and improve those services, and in 2023–24 we had 321 site visits across the 128 electorate offices – so trying to get out. There is more demand from electorate officers as well for that face-to-face contact.

Of course in 2023 was the first ever electorate officer conference. We are pretty sure it was a global first as well. We could not come across one in any other jurisdiction. Regardless of how electorate offices are formed in other jurisdictions, that idea of getting together staff members who support members in their community had not happened before. It was really well represented across parties, across the houses and across electorate officers – some who had been working as electorate officers for 15 years and some who were in their first few months – with that sharing opportunity. Not wanting to give away next year's report, but the 2024 conference just happened. We had a higher volume of electorate officers attend, and we also had more regional offices represented than metropolitan offices in 2024. We were benefited by a working group of EO3s across parties and across electorate offices who helped pull that conference together.

The offices themselves: in 2023 there were 16 new electorate offices that came online. Members may recall back in 2021 there were standards that were agreed to with the Presiding Officers at the time and the house committee, and there has been a process of rolling out new electorate offices to those standards, sometimes refurbishing existing offices, where that has been possible. We continue that program; it has got another few years to roll.

On to security: this is a chart that you will see shows the change in security incidents across electorate offices and the precinct. You will see that the precinct has become fairly stable over the last three years. There has been an increase in electorate office reports. One of the things that we have tried hard to do is encourage electorate officers to report everything that happens. The more data we have about that, the more we can respond quickly but also see and understand what is happening in electorate offices. Whilst this chart demonstrates that there has been an increase over the year, it may be showing an increase in just reporting behaviour of electorate officers as well.

On to everyone's favourite topic of cybersecurity: the information is up there on the report, but just to let you know, on an average day there are over 10,000 threat events that occur in our cyber environment, about 35,000 emails are blocked, 88,000 websites are blocked and there are 1.3 million blocked connection attempts into our network. So we are a target network, and we are continually trying to improve and develop that.

Finally from me are some statistics in relation to the work of our Hansard and broadcast team and the hours of work that go into making sure that everything that you say in hearings and in the houses is recorded accurately. The one item I just want to point out on here is the broadcast hours for committees. You will see the big difference between 2022–23 and 2023–24. The broadcast team work diligently to come up with a very creative way to be able to broadcast committees outside of the precinct, and that has resulted in more hours of broadcast

being available to constituents to see the work of Parliament and really builds into that support that is provided to members and the houses. I will just hand back to Bridget.

Bridget NOONAN: Thanks, Trish. I wanted to quickly mention the work that the parliamentary departments do in supporting Pacific parliaments through the twinning programs with Fiji, Nauru and Tuvalu. That is auspiced by the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association. So really – outside our time – no output funding is devoted to the twinning program, because the CPA is its own, I guess, self-funded organisation, and we rely on and are very grateful for the funding that is provided by partner organisations like the United Nations Development Programme and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. But because it does draw on our time – and particularly we are very grateful for the input of members in supporting our Pacific parliaments – I thought it was worth bringing to the committee’s attention that there has been a good degree of work supporting our Fiji, Nauru and Tuvalu colleagues in the last year, particularly to do with really practical things such as a whips workshop, which I know members here participated in, and some budget analysis and member training for Fiji members. We have hosted officers from various parliaments here to see how we go about our work. I know some of that has tipped into this financial year, so as Trish said, not to pre-empt next year’s report and our appearance, but there will be more to report. I just wanted to use the opportunity to extend my thanks to members. I know sometimes I call on you at short notice to contribute, and I am very grateful for that.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Noonan. The first 6 minutes are going to go to the Deputy Chair.

Nick McGOWAN: Thank you, all. Thank you, Secretary and everyone else, for your reports. I am advised, Secretary, by those who know better than I that the last annual report included mention in respect to Operation Watts, and I am advised that there is no such reference this year. Is that correct?

Trish BURROWS: In the annual report?

Nick McGOWAN: In the annual report.

Trish BURROWS: I think the electorate officers conference is part of the response to Operation Watts. We might not have specifically called it out in the report. The story is a little bit more I suppose magazine-style, those sort of easy-to-read-type stories.

Nick McGOWAN: Is there an update in terms of how many of the recommendations DPS have concluded?

Trish BURROWS: We continue to work on the recommendations that were assigned to us, and we will have an update report required to IBAC and the Victorian Ombudsman – I cannot remember exactly when that is due, I am sorry, but that will come through. It is really continuing on those ones that were assigned to us. There was not a particular recommendation that no response had happened to. It is just getting better and better at the work that we are doing, primarily focused on supporting electorate officers in situ, providing training for them, improving our induction program for electorate officers and providing training and development opportunities for them to improve their skills. We obviously provided training to members who were inducted in the 2022 election in relation to their obligations for electorate officers, and we continue to do that.

Nick McGOWAN: I am reading here that \$8.52 million was provided over four years to support DPS to implement the Watts recommendations. Do you know how much of that allocated funding has been spent to date?

Trish BURROWS: It is spread out over the four years, and in the last two years we have not spent the full allocation for each of those years. This will be the first year that we will reach full capacity on that funding. It did fund some positions, for example, in our HR team so that we can do that outreach that I called on before and provide training. Those roles – this will be the first year that they will all be filled, and we will have a good chance to tell what funding is required.

Nick McGOWAN: Okay. Can you tell us how much has been spent in the year to date?

Trish BURROWS: I would have to take that one on notice and come back to you.

Nick McGOWAN: Okay. And in terms of the report you referenced before that will be given to IBAC. Is it the Secretary of DPC that receives that report as well?

Trish BURROWS: No. We have reporting obligations jointly to IBAC and the Victorian Ombudsman. We have provided two updates to them. I am pretty sure there is another one to come, but again I can take that on notice and just confirm –

Nick McGOWAN: Just the date of that.

Trish BURROWS: there is another update to come.

Nick McGOWAN: Thank you. Will any additional funding be sought? Have you considered that at this point in time?

Trish BURROWS: The funding that we have got at the moment takes us through to the 2025–26 financial year. What we intend to do is use this year, as I said, as a prime year to work out what those costs are to continue the same sort of support that we have been doing to date and then work with the Presiding Officers as to whether a further funding request is put in for past the 2025–26 financial year.

Nick McGOWAN: Okay. Thank you. I know we ask this every year, and I am sure it is always on your mind – the construction works. What is the latest update there in terms of completion or expected completion?

Trish BURROWS: So east wing I think you are talking about there?

Nick McGOWAN: Yes.

Trish BURROWS: East wing itself is nearing completion. We expect at the start of next year for levels 3 and 4 to be available during sitting weeks for occupancy. The final thing that happens in east wing is the north stair. It could not be done at the same time that the south stair is being done because you have to have one egress point from level 2 and others. Once the new stair opens, which I am sure you all have used, on the south side, the north stair works can then commence. It is the last thing that happens. The crane has to stay until the stair goes in, and that is the middle of next year that that stair will be completed.

Nick McGOWAN: Okay. Do we know the total cost to date of the works that have been carried out on level–

Do you delineate between levels 3 and 4 for cost purposes, or is it just the one project?

Trish BURROWS: It is a single project for this stage of works.

Nick McGOWAN: And do you know what the cost has been to date for the project?

Trish BURROWS: Can I take that on notice and just come back to you with an accurate figure?

Nick McGOWAN: Sure. Can I just intersect with my own personal question: the dining room, since the removal of the curtains – is there a plan to do something there or it is just the plinth?

Trish BURROWS: No, there is a plan to do something there, to get some specific advice about the best way to treat those windows, whether it is curtains of that nature or whether we can treat the glass to help with the reflection so that you continue to see the view. But yes, we are due to get some advice on that.

Nick McGOWAN: Can you confirm for me what the original plan was for the use of the space on level 4? Was that originally intended to be occupied by staff, DPC staff?

Trish BURROWS: No. I was not here when that project started, but having read the material, there was not really a set plan on the use of levels 3 and 4 when the works kicked off. It was really forming the shell itself and making sure that space was available. The area was fairly unsafe to be in. I often hear members giving tours of the library and describing their old office in the top right-hand corner and the issues they had. So it was really to create the space and then at the time for the Presiding Officer here to make a decision about how it gets used.

Nick McGOWAN: Is there any additional allocated space for, it says DPC in my notes, but I guess what they are getting at is probably the Premier's office? Any additional space for the Premier's office?

Trish BURROWS: Not that I am aware of. It has not been on any document I have ever seen.

Nick McGOWAN: Okay. Did DPS as far as you know consider the cost implications of the continued use of 15 –

The CHAIR: Apologies, Deputy Chair. We are going to go straight to Mr Galea.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Secretary and clerks, for joining us this afternoon. Secretary, I will start with you on a similar topic. We are in a beautiful building that is definitely not custom-built for modern needs. If I can ask you about the works that have been going on to make it more accessible to all visitors but also in particular for members who have new accessibility needs. What sort of work has been going on to support them both in the precinct and in the chamber?

Trish BURROWS: Over the last few years there has been work done to identify physical accessibility issues, to try and improve them – I will not say make them perfect but improve them. So things that are coming up in the future that you might not have seen include the change to the lift that is on the Legislative Assembly side. It will become wider and accessible on that side; it is very narrow. That is one of the projects that is coming up. The rear entrance and other flat-line aspects of that and the new lift that is on the south side – once the works are finished they will be more accessible as well, to come in that space. Where there are particular needs, we work with the individuals who might have particular needs within their workspace to make sure that adjustments are made with their advice and what they require. So anything that current people might want, we absolutely provide it and find a way to do that to make sure that all participants in the parliamentary environment can fully participate.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. And Ms Noonan, if I can call you that, Pacific parliamentary partnerships have been a very important part of what we have done over the past financial year as a Victorian Parliament, and you mentioned Nauru, Tuvalu and Fiji. Could you talk to me a little bit more about what those programs have looked like in the past 12 months?

Bridget NOONAN: Certainly. I acknowledge that our relationship with Fiji is subject to particular funding from DFAT, so we have a three-year grant of \$240,000 over three years to deliver capacity building in Fiji. That is probably why the bulk of our work is done in Fiji, because that has a designated funding stream. We do have work funded for Nauru and Tuvalu at different times, as Mr Galea I know you participated in new member training for Tuvalu, which I will be talking about this time next year, I am sure. We are very much guided by expertise on the ground in those parliaments, whether that is our colleagues as clerks, the Presiding Officers or staff working at high commissions or the UNDP, to identify particular business needs.

Some real highlights I think were my colleagues and I hosted the deputy clerk from Nauru, who came on a two-week professional development attachment to observe our ways of working, our governance structures, our management processes and things like that. Particularly with Fiji participating in member induction, as I mentioned, there was the whips workshop and of great benefit was also a committees workshop, which some of our members participated in, which I think has really been quite useful. It is not to necessarily try and transport the Victorian committee model to Fiji – that is not appropriate; that is not what is fit for purpose there – but to explain some of the tips and tricks that our members and our staff have found in supporting committees have been quite useful. Similarly, the whips workshop here did the same thing, so not to talk about – it is more of a shared experience where those people can get together and talk about the work that they do.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. If I can ask as well about Hansard and audiovisual – talk about them as if they are not in the room, as they very much always are – the stats were incredibly impressive as to the uptick especially in committee hearings being broadcast. I imagine that would be quite a logistical challenge. And as Ms Sargent mentioned, we have had a number of regional committee hearings this year as well, particularly in the lead-up to the regional sitting, and of course the regional sitting itself, which was a very impressive set-up by those teams in order to accommodate that. What sorts of works had to go into providing more resources and supports for those teams to do that work?

Trish BURROWS: The regional sitting, as Robert talked about, was quite a logistical event between the trucks and the amount of cords that needed to go up. This room was set up by the team to do a lot of testing of that equipment over the week beforehand and then pack everything away. It was a bit like a Taylor Swift concert, really, but without the big ticket price. So that is a bit of a one-off, but a lot of effort goes into that. More broadly in relation to the committees that are offsite, yes, it does take quite a lot of effort from the staff

that attend from the house departments as well as from DPS. And as I said, the one-camera look at a committee for those regional sittings has really been quite a creative solution. They have managed to design how that can happen and set up and train people to do that so that we can broadcast those committees wherever they are, but it is a logistical effort that is required.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. And just very quickly, with the changing, evolving needs of technology and the way people can access Parliament through it, can you talk to me about investments into the resolution of videos and things like that to make Parliament more accessible?

Trish BURROWS: Well, we kicked off quite a research piece in relation to that –

The CHAIR: Apologies. I am going to interrupt there and keep to time. We are going back to Mr McGowan.

Nick McGOWAN: Thank you, Chair. I will pick up where I left off, and that was in respect to – and it might pre-date your time – whether there were any cost implications or consideration of the ongoing rental over at 157 Spring Street in terms of the plan to bring them over here or –

Trish BURROWS: 157 Spring Street is not rented by DPS or the parliamentary departments.

Nick McGOWAN: It is DPC, is it?

Trish BURROWS: Yes, that is right. So not something that –

Nick McGOWAN: It is quite cost effective in that regard.

Trish BURROWS: Yes – no cost at all. Thank you.

Nick McGOWAN: Quite. I noticed there was quite a large figure there for depreciation. What was that in respect to?

Trish BURROWS: Depreciation, and I can take it on notice to get the accountant's answer to this – I am not sure if our CFO is watching online – but essentially we have a lot of assets, including this beautiful building as well, but the leaseholds we have on our electorate offices as well need to get depreciated. It is a factor of accounting that the depreciation number comes into our accounts.

Nick McGOWAN: I saw the figure there of 16 new electorate offices. How many are you expecting to be new leases for the next financial year? Have you started planning to do that sort of work?

Trish BURROWS: Yes. We are expecting 13 new relocations or full refurbishments in this financial year. There will be extensions of leases on the existing electorate offices but 13 new ones.

Nick McGOWAN: And in respect to the electorate offices, I heard you refer to a program. Is there an accessibility program both for the staff but also for the public there, so disability for example?

Trish BURROWS: Yes. The standards that were approved in 2021 say that every electorate office needs to be DDA compliant, so whenever we look at a site for an office it goes through a checklist. One of those is DDA compliance, so that we can achieve that both from the egress perspective – so getting in from the footpath – as well as things like toilet facilities and what is possible to configure the space. That is one of the things we look at when we are assessing whether a particular site is suitable.

Nick McGOWAN: Are members able to access that in terms of seeing where their office might sit on that list in terms of being DDA compliant and whether there is a schedule of work or schedule of proposed –

Trish BURROWS: Certainly whether they are DDA compliant we could definitely inform – the current office, whether that is DDA compliant. We run a revolving list about electorate offices and what is a priority. I will give you a couple of examples. An electorate office might get flooded and the landlord might not want to do the repairs to that office, so whilst that office might have been suitable all of a sudden it jumps as a priority. There might be a major security incident at an electorate office that we look at and go, 'Really it's not the best place for an electorate office; we should look to relocate that earlier than perhaps what was otherwise

expected.’ And then, of course, in the Legislative Council after an election because your regions are so large we might have an electorate office at one end of it, but the member elected is all the way at the other end of it, and then we need to get an electorate office a bit closer and close out this lease. We have a running, live list of priorities, but it does change all the time, so it is not a set sequence. And then also we might find an electorate office in the top 10 – we might find the right electorate office for number 10 while we are still looking for two, three, four and five, so we will not let that one go if we cannot find one for the other ones, so we are constantly managing that list.

Nick McGOWAN: So that needs to be DDA-compliant for the electorate staff and the member, not just necessarily for the visitors – the public?

Trish BURROWS: Correct. That is right. It needs to be a contemporary office.

Nick McGOWAN: Do we have any idea – sorry, I am darting around on issues here – of the total cost now for the regional sitting that was in April?

Robert McDONALD: Yes. I think that is now – is that the now final figure?

Anne SARGENT: Yes.

Robert McDONALD: \$171,000.

Nick McGOWAN: Presumably that does not include, obviously, staff time here and so forth.

Anne SARGENT: No.

Robert McDONALD: I suppose it could include staff just working during their usual hours.

Nick McGOWAN: Additional hours that are charged, but it would not include the time that they took the week before.

Robert McDONALD: In the preparation, no, that just would have been part of their ordinary duties, yes. That kind of thing.

Nick McGOWAN: In terms of cybersecurity – Secretary, you obviously know these things – in terms of the amount of people we have working on that in your department, are you satisfied that there is sufficient manpower in that respect?

Trish BURROWS: We have a very small team working in cybersecurity and could always do with more resources in that space. They are quite hard to come by. Of course, that is an industry that is ever growing across large organisations, companies, private sector and public sector, and we need to be pretty vigilant about it. We are happy with the systems we have got in place to protect Parliament, so at the moment we are not seeking more funds or resources, but it is something we have to keep our eye on all the time.

Nick McGOWAN: In that respect I see you have got a note there that the video-on-demand requests have gone up quite considerably. What do you attribute that to? I suppose that has a flow-on effect also because that is also manual, right; that is not automated.

Trish BURROWS: Yes, so I attribute it to members wanting to communicate with their electorate as to why the demand has gone up and of course the great-quality work that is produced by the broadcast team. One of the things that I think I just started to say to Mr Galea is we have just started to undertake a research piece on a program of works to upgrade all of our broadcast facilities. Part of that is improving the offering we have on video on demand. You may know some other parliaments have it publicly available and have easier access for members, for electorate officers and, for that matter, for the public, and we are looking at how we can do that over the coming years to upgrade all of our facilities. So we have kicked off with that, but keep your eyes peeled.

The CHAIR: Thank you. We will go to Ms Kathage.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you, Chair and Secretary. I wanted to also ask about security. You have mentioned it in your questionnaire; on page 42 you list some of the challenges that have been experienced and security is there. Physical security I am referring to, rather than the cybersecurity we were hearing about before. It is not just here in Parliament House but it is the electorate offices as well, and it is not just in Victoria but it is across the country. It seems to be a growing issue, notwithstanding your comments during your presentation about increased reporting. The questionnaire lists some of your actions that you have taken in response. Can you expand on those a bit more, under audit and review and the upgrades, without going into specifics?

Trish BURROWS: Yes, I will just be careful about that. Security across the precinct and electorate offices has really been on the increase – improvements for maybe five years or so, maybe a little bit longer than that. There have been a lot of improvements over that time. In particular what we have tried to focus on is prevention, to a degree, so you will see barriers to getting into places. If I think about an electorate office, those things that anyone can see when they walk down the street are that they can see CCTV and they can see the potential to keep the office closed and use a doorbell so that staff can see who is coming in. The design of the electorate office itself under the new standards has a barrier between members of the public coming in and staff, so that they cannot really get past that entry point, to protect staff there as well. Here on the precinct we have security officers at the entry points every day that Parliament House is open, and of course protective services officers are here 365 days a year as well.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you. Last year the committee sought information on how staff have been impacted by the security incidents that we have had. Are the strategies that you have spoken about showing signs of improving the workplace health and safety conditions for your staff?

Trish BURROWS: The staff who are often affected by incidents are electorate officers. There has been pretty appalling conduct at electorate offices outside, with graffiti and other aspects, and turning up to work and having your office damaged in that way is pretty distressing. The protocols for inside DPS have really improved over the last few years. Often it is our security team that are first notified of that. They have a practice of notifying our HR team and our property services team so that the staff involved are immediately getting access to people with the skills able to support them during that period of time. I think we have got definitely continued improvement, but there has been a real uptake in taking on that responsibility and making sure we respond really quickly when an incident has occurred, to not just the physical incident and correcting that and dealing with the police but also the people who are affected by it.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you. Then of course there are the third locations. We had a committee hearing in Shepparton and there is the regional sitting that we have been hearing a bit about, so I guess additional work is required around this. Have protocols changed for those sorts of things?

Trish BURROWS: Yes. The security team do a security assessment of any offsite location and make recommendations as to what needs to occur. For the regional sitting, if we can talk about that, because it was also publicly obvious what was going on, there was security staff up there – both staff and contractors – onsite to make sure that the environment that the hearing was in was secure. That was at all times that that hearing was going on. So, assessment, mitigations, action is the approach.

Lauren KATHAGE: Are you coming to the point now, in terms of the public galleries – because your charter and the work that you do is very much about this being the people's house and access – where the actions and the work that you have taken around security to date are moving you towards a position where you feel more comfortable to open the galleries?

Trish BURROWS: The gallery is open in the Legislative Council, and in the Legislative Assembly it has got a restricted number of people who can go in. That is more about the physical environment in the gallery. If you have ever been up there, it is very steep.

Bridget NOONAN: It is quite vertiginous, yes, so we have limited the number of people in the Assembly's upper gallery for now. As Trish said, that is really more of a physical safety consideration, pending some works next year, than anything else.

Trish BURROWS: Yes, so we do plan to refit that upper gallery area to make it a bit more modern. Like, it is just all crammed in there together, so it is about space and accessibility. That work should be done during 2025, and then that will improve access for members of the public.

Lauren KATHAGE: Is there a plan regarding the balustrade as well?

Trish BURROWS: Yes, it includes upgrading the balustrade.

Lauren KATHAGE: Great, because the balustrade even from the chamber makes me feel uneasy. It is quite low. It is great to hear you have got that work going on. Thank you, Secretary.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Kathage. We are going to go back to – Deputy Chair?

Bev McARTHUR: I will just gazump you for a minute. Ms Burrows, what is happening with the water leaking in our annexe?

Trish BURROWS: The members annexe's water issues have been investigated by an engineering firm, which is Arup. They have provided us with their findings, and that has been shared with the house committee – a summary of those findings. They did physical investigations to determine where they thought the issues were and what solutions might be possible. We have asked them to come back with the plans on those options, so what would it actually require to do, how long would it take, how much would it cost to do those plans and a few other options just sort of thinking a bit more laterally as well as to what might be possible. That comes in before the end of the year, so we are expecting that shortly. They will present that to us with the Presiding Officers to get a plan about what might be the best approach to fix the issue, so not a patchwork but to fix the issue for good. That is what we have asked them to come back with, and they are busy doing design work at the moment to get those solutions.

Bev McARTHUR: And what about the air conditioning in the annexe, which is also a disaster? It is either freezing cold or boiling hot.

Trish BURROWS: I will take that one on notice. The air conditioning out there is automated. It is a star-rated building and the air conditioning is part of the building management system, but if there is a particular issue in your office I am happy to take that up.

Bev McARTHUR: Everybody has got it, I think. You are either freezing cold under the draft or it is boiling hot, and the only way we can adjust it is to open a window and do away with the whole thing altogether.

Trish BURROWS: All right, let me take that one, if you would not mind.

Bev McARTHUR: And how are you going with that light up in the courtyard?

Trish BURROWS: I have absolutely got that light on my list of things to do, because it is about safety. Coming back to really the first question, all of these things that you raised are about making sure it is a safe workplace, and lighting is important not just for trip hazards but also for security.

Bev McARTHUR: Fantastic. Deputy Chair.

Nick McGOWAN: Thank you, Secretary Burrows. According to the DPS's latest annual report, OH&S injuries more than doubled, so I read in here, increasing by 108 per cent. Do you know why that was?

Trish BURROWS: I do not know exactly why that was. I imagine it is not one reason.

Nick McGOWAN: No, I imagine not. I suppose what the question really asks is: is there a trend, is there concern?

Trish BURROWS: No. We look at trend data, and there is nothing that has come up. Again, we have really pushed the reporting culture. I would like to look at that data over the next three years and see if we have stabilised it, but amongst staff here in the precincts, so parliamentary officer staff as well as electorate office staff, we have really pushed that reporting culture to make sure that we are recording all of that information.

Nick McGOWAN: You will appreciate that again I am reading here, so I will take it at face value, but it says there has been an 84 per cent year-on-year reduction in hazard inspections, from 57 to nine. Do you know what that figure reflects or why that figure is the case?

Trish BURROWS: No. Can I take that one on notice as well? I will come back to you on that.

Nick McGOWAN: Yes, definitely. Like Mrs McArthur's, perhaps a more personal question here, but on behalf of most members: the photocopiers. I understand they are going to be replaced in our electorate offices. Obviously they are important for community use and so forth. Do you know when that planned rollout is of new photocopiers, or am I wrong in saying that is planned?

Trish BURROWS: No, the MFDs are due for replacement. I do not think it is in the very near future, but it is over the next 18 months or so is my recollection.

Nick McGOWAN: You break my heart, Secretary. Starting in 18 months?

Trish BURROWS: No, no. I think that is when they are due to occur. I know we are doing some work now to work out what the best solution for those is, but I think it is in the financial year after next.

Nick McGOWAN: Whether they want this question asked on their behalf or not is another question indeed, but increasingly I have colleagues who seem to be pregnant. Are there any plans in the Parliament to help accommodate their needs, including on this committee? Are there any particular plans to help the livability for those particular members – for obvious reasons? It is actually a serious question.

Bev McARTHUR: Have you got something in mind, Mr McGowan?

Nick McGOWAN: I am not the expert, clearly. But nonetheless there may well be plans that I am not familiar with.

Trish BURROWS: Yes, we are very mindful of the changing demographic as well of members. I often walk through this building and think of the successful way that this building is adapted over time. Of course it was built pre electricity, it was built pre plumbing, and yet all of these things have managed to be incorporated into this building. So as we look towards providing a carers space opportunity for members of Parliament, who of course do not dictate their own work hours, unlike some of the rest of the employees, who can have some control over that, a space should be provided. We are working pretty hard to try and pull that off. I do not have anything today to announce, but we are working pretty hard to try and make sure that we accommodate members who have that caring obligation for young children and can continue to represent their constituency in the Parliament during those years.

Nick McGOWAN: Before I do run out of time, I am going to indulge myself here and just thank you and your staff for putting up with the likes of Mr Hilakari and Mrs McArthur. I think I am projecting in actual fact. But nonetheless, in all sincerity – our thanks. I think because, particularly on the IT side, I know they have got an incredible amount of work to do, but likewise the rest of the offices, security, so forth, sometimes we are very trying and sometimes impatient, and I am probably projecting, but nonetheless it is appreciated.

The CHAIR: Okay, we are going to Mr Tak.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you, Chair. In the interests of educational programs, in the 2023–24 budget estimates the department of community engagement as one of the strategic issues influencing the development of the estimates, how has investment in educational programs such as Mission Control and Teacher Open House benefited the department?

Trish BURROWS: I think just while we decide who is going to answer, one of the things is that it is a joint effort. All three departments work on those activities and so that is partly why we are saying, 'Well, who should take that?' The Presiding Officers have clearly given directions to the three of us that engaging the community, making sure that there is access to the building itself and access to members of Parliament are part of our role, and supporting members of Parliament, so that has been a key focus for the Presiding Officers.

Robert McDONALD: I suppose as part of our community engagement strategy we have an annual community engagement plan where we identify a number of initiatives, and I think as was mentioned in the presentation part of that is focusing on teacher professional development, and so having opportunities to bring teachers into the building to educate them, so that they can then educate their students. But it is also us going out to a number of groups, and actually the Mission Control one that you mentioned – I was very fortunate. The President and I as a part of the regional sitting actually delivered that Mission Control program to some students from the local area that actually came to Echuca and were able to learn about how collective decision-making

works that the Parliament does through the Mission Control program where they actually form parties and they sit around the table to debate the issues. The idea is: if you were going to another planet, which industries would you take to another planet? They have the government, they have the opposition, they have a minor party, and they debate the reasons why you need various industries on another planet, and then they vote and then they make those decisions, and they collectively decide what industries they would like to take.

It was quite good having the President with me, who played his role of chairing that discussion, and they all had to vote. It was interesting in that particular one that entertainment was the one they decided they did not need. I do not know whether it was a country school mentality that you go to work and you go to improve the new planet; you do not go to have fun. So I think that was an interesting outcome, but it was a pretty unanimous outcome. But I think they have had other ones where they have done the same program and you get a different result. I think that is the way they are each representing their school and their party in that kind of discussion, so it is just another way of teaching them about Parliament through a much more interactive thing. I think they then get to play with remote control cars as well as part of the thing, so it is a really engaging program.

Meng Heang TAK: And are there are any other programs that you want to talk to the committee about?

Robert McDONALD: We are partnering with a number of organisations. I think the Parliament Prize is probably another one that we would like to highlight. They did get a record 1126 entries in the last program. I think a number of members were involved in the evaluating of those entries where students get to do a members statement and they talk about something that they want in their community. I think it is really good that we are trying to reach out to more and more regional schools and have that participation from across the state, so I think that was another really powerful community engagement initiative. Then we also participate in Science Week. Again partnering with other organisations that already have their platform to get information out to the community, we kind of tie in with them so we are able to leverage some of their networks.

Bridget NOONAN: Just picking up Robert's point, one thing we have tried to do a little bit differently in the tours team in my department is our regional outreach. Historically, we would go to a community hub – showing where I grew up, we would go to the Horsham town hall – and then invite all the regional schools to come in for a role-play there, and we have tried to make it, in the last financial year, as easy as possible for schools to get involved, so when our team go to the regions they go to each of those schools. So you might be hitting a smaller school but going there directly rather than asking that school to come into the hub, and I think that has been well received. There are merits for and against both of those approaches, but it seems to be working quite well.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you. Obviously today we just had graduation for the parliamentary interns. Would you like to talk a bit more on that, if possible, just for our benefit?

Trish BURROWS: The parliamentary internship program, as you would have heard this morning, is in its 35th year. It is pretty incredible these days to have a program that goes that long. It is a credit to the universities that are involved. Certainly the staff of the parliamentary library really drive that program. We are grateful for members who volunteer to have an intern work with them on those reports, and this year I think there were 41 interns, I want to say, who went through from the universities. As one of the staff from, I think, the University of Melbourne said this morning, it is one of the few parts of their program that is real life; it is that idea that they come in here and speak with a real member of Parliament. What are the issues that that member is dealing with? What are the constituents asking that member to do? So I think that program offering that to students is a real advantage.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Mr Tak. We will go straight to Mr Puglielli.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. Good afternoon. Hi. Could I just ask for an update on the status of the parliamentary advisers' bargaining agreement? Where is that up to, and when is it looking to be finalised?

Trish BURROWS: Today the proposed agreement was sent to parliamentary advisers for their comment on the proposal. There has been agreement from the Premier to changed terms and conditions; the Premier is the decider on that. That has gone into the agreement and has been sent to the current group of advisers for

consultation. We have asked them to come back within the week to provide their feedback on the proposal. Subject to that feedback, we will look to finalise that in the coming weeks.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Great. Thanks. Just onto the tours, do you keep records on the languages that people speak who are undertaking those tours of Parliament?

Bridget NOONAN: For the public tours, we do exit surveys of where people have visited from, which is not exactly a perfect match of what languages they speak. I might take the detail on notice. I am speaking on principles, but I will come back to you with the details, because we do have some data on the main languages spoken by visitors, and we try and tailor some of our resources accordingly. I will come back to you with the specific details.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, and I have potentially got a follow-up on notice, actually. If you could provide any data on the amount of times the audio guides are requested for tours and perhaps just aggregate that by each requested language, that would be amazing.

Bridget NOONAN: Yes, I am happy to do that.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. You might need this data to hand to answer this, but it would be great to know what is the most common out of those requested languages.

Bridget NOONAN: I do not want to answer off the top of my head, so I will take that one on notice too.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: One more – if there is any sort of overlap of languages that are requested that you cannot currently provide audio guides for, it would be great to know if that is the case and what they are.

Bridget NOONAN: Yes, super.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Has there been any consideration by the department on offering live translated tours of the Parliament?

Bridget NOONAN: We certainly provide Auslan-translated tours on request. It might be one of those things that has not occurred to us because nobody has asked. But I think – sorry, I should start that again. When we have, obviously, delegation visits and things like that, they are often translated, but that is an interesting issue; I think I might steal that idea from you.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: I have just got a note here that I think the NGV do a program where they have got international students and recent graduates that are offering Cantonese and Mandarin live-translated tours. I am just thinking what the possibilities might be, and, again, the data that you might have on notice might inform that.

Bridget NOONAN: We have certainly done some targeted events or some specific events for particular groups and communities, but that is different again from translated tours, which I will come back to you on.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: All good. Just on to the security measures we heard about earlier – the increased security personnel and installation of additional CCTV, for example – what financial impact has that had?

Trish BURROWS: The increase in security initiatives that has occurred over the last few years has been funded directly by the government of the day, so it has not required additional funds from an existing bucket. There have been new funds provided for that uplift in security.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. Is there a view from the department as to how long it is anticipated that those additional measures will be required?

Trish BURROWS: Ongoing.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Just with my remaining time, many MP offices have casual staff who do regular work, and due to limited FTE allocations they cannot then be offered permanent work ongoing. What considerations have been made to allow those casuals to move to permanent part-time and be paid through EOC budgets?

Trish BURROWS: The allocation of electorate officers to members, the 2.5 FTE, which is the entitlement, if you like, is a number that is set by the government of the day, and we then facilitate that to occur. The EO and C budget – the tribunal guidelines have said that members can use that to pay casuals. The intersection comes with the legislation itself as to the employer of all electorate officers being jointly by the presiding officers, so you cannot have two streams of employment going on. Any change to that is not a matter for the department. We are transacting the entitlement that exists there for the members.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Sure. Just further to that, have there been any discussions with the government regarding considerations to increasing that FTE staffing allocation?

Trish BURROWS: For all members of Parliament?

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Yes.

Trish BURROWS: Not that I am aware of.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Good to know.

Trish BURROWS: I do not necessarily think I would be involved in them either.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: All good. A seemingly random question: the Parliament restaurants and catering services, do they make more money than they spend?

Trish BURROWS: No.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: I was going to ask: if they did, what happens to those additional funds? I think Bev had a question earlier. The Sessions Cafe partition – what is going on up there at the moment?

Trish BURROWS: That is part of east wing. That will be there until the north stair goes in. That is a fire and life safety requirement, the distance that you need to be from a stairwell in case there is an emergency incident. The far northern corner of the building is too far from the southern steps, so that is a requirement of our building permit to do that. As soon as the building works are done it will be reopened again, when the north stair opens.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Puglielli. I love people that are right on time. We are going to go to Mr Hilakari.

Mathew HILAKARI: Thank you. You were some way through your discussion about the internship program, not internment program. We have a jail here, but it is used for other things – but the internship program. You were midway through, so I was just hoping you could finish off about that. Then I have got some complaints around the award process and who decided them, because both of my interns were great and only one got an award.

Trish BURROWS: I will take your second point first. No-one at this table was involved in that decision.

Bridget NOONAN: We would have given everyone a prize.

Trish BURROWS: That is right.

Mathew HILAKARI: Particularly Cat and Miguel. They did amazing reports, so a big shout-out to them.

Trish BURROWS: The university lecturers make those decisions, so they are making an academic decision. I probably was partway through saying that the longevity of the program and the experience that students have does seem to stick with them. We were fortunate this morning to have Nick Staikos and Gaelle Broad talk to the interns. They were both former interns, so they were able to share that experience, in one case several decades ago, about how it lit a little fire in their thinking about how to represent their community and how to participate in society. I think any program that lights that fire in university students is a great program, and I hope it continues for a long time.

Mathew HILAKARI: Hear, hear. All strength to that. The EO conference – I am just hoping to understand some of the things that you learned from the first conference that you held, what you changed and implemented in the one most recently held and what changes you might have had and what learnings you had.

Trish BURROWS: The most significant change was we then had the opportunity to engage electorate officers in deciding what happened at the next conference. The first conference was a bit of a ‘Let’s give it a go – suck it and see.’ And then after that there was a working group of I think about eight EO3 electorate officers who really guided the content of the program for the second one. The feedback that has come in from the electorate officers who attended is that they noticed – they really noticed – that that was driven a lot by the really deep experience of those electorate officers. We also had special sessions for electorate officers who are in that EO3 category, who often have office manager accountability – a little bit of people management but also a bit more elevated experience – so sessions for them where they were already on a high base and trying to develop further. When of course you have got a wide cohort in a room, you are sort of trying to hit the middle, but an opportunity for that group to also do their own learning together and learn from each other was one of the big things that changed between the two years.

Mathew HILAKARI: And what sorts of different sessions were you running then? What were some of the sessions that you got rid of, and what are some of those ones that you are starting to put more emphasis on?

Trish BURROWS: One of the things that I know got good feedback in the second one was a session that was very well attended in relation to helping members communicate with their electorate – different ways to style a message, when to send that message out and how to capture an audience so that people hear what is being said to them. I actually sat in on that one. It was very well attended, and they got a lot of positive feedback from that. I do not think there was anything particular we let go of from the first one. Certainly the EOs break into the particular houses of their members as well, and we get great feedback on the time that they spend with the clerks and deputy clerks and staff from the house departments to support the electorate officers to understand how they can support their member when they are here on sitting days. Those sessions always get really good feedback as well.

Mathew HILAKARI: Just to move to another matter, do we have a percentage of electorate offices that do not meet the security standards that were set out in, was it, 2021? Were they the standards that were set then?

Trish BURROWS: The electorate office standards were set in 2021. The security overlay has come along subsequent to that. I do not have a percent that do not meet it, but I can come back to you on that. It will be fairly high level, though.

Mathew HILAKARI: That is all I am after. That is why I am asking for a percentage rather than specific offices of course. I was interested, in your presentation, that the new passwords are checked against a database of previously breached passwords from the dark web. Can you tell me any more detail about that?

Trish BURROWS: Well, I do not think it is that unusual. Sometimes you will get a notification from your bank or you will try to use a password and they say you cannot use that password. It is implementing those sorts of higher level responses or security levels to our network as well – picking up maybe someone using ‘password12345678910’ as a password as well and those ones that are more easy to break. We have a 14-character password – I think I can say that without breaching anything – which takes a long time for even any machine to try and break, which is why it is a 14-character password.

Mathew HILAKARI: There were a couple of new performance measures in the 2023–24 budget, including examining MP satisfaction of standing committees and advice about procedural research and administration being objective and prompt. What sort of work has been undertaken to seek to improve that, and how did we go?

Trish BURROWS: Sure. That is a measure of you guys.

Robert McDONALD: Yes. I think that was a new performance measure that came out of a recommendation of this committee to kind of look at standing committees now that both houses have a significant standing committee system as well as a joint committee system. I think this was the first year that we actually did that survey. I suppose the response rate could have been higher.

Mathew HILAKARI: We are out of time.

The CHAIR: Apologies, Mr McDonald. I am going to stop you there. Secretary and parliamentary clerks, thank you so much for taking the time to come and talk to us this afternoon. The committee will follow up on questions taken on notice in writing, and responses are required within five working days of the committee's request.

Just off the back of the Deputy Chair's comments about the incredible hard work that you provide day in, day out to this Parliament, whether it is sitting or not, I do want to join the Deputy Chair in saying thank you on behalf of the committee and on behalf of colleagues and friends here in this place. You do not get thanked enough for the very hard work that you do. On a personal note, I certainly enjoy coming each and every single sitting week and seeing you all. You make this place run absolutely seamlessly, so thank you.

I would also like to thank all secretaries and officers who have given evidence to the committee today, Hansard and the secretariat. The committee will resume its consideration of the 2023–24 financial and performance outcomes on Tuesday 19 November at 9:30 am.

I declare this hearing adjourned.

Committee adjourned.