

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2023–24 Financial and Performance Outcomes

Melbourne – Tuesday 19 November 2024

MEMBERS

Sarah Connolly – Chair

Nicholas McGowan – Deputy Chair

Michael Galea

Mathew Hilakari

Lauren Kathage

Bev McArthur

Danny O’Brien

Aiv Puglielli

Meng Heang Tak

WITNESSES

Jeremi Moule, Secretary,

Jeroen Weimar, Deputy Secretary, Housing Statement Implementation,

Joshua Puls, Deputy Secretary, Justice and Public Administration,

Brigid Sunderland, Deputy Secretary, Social Policy and Intergovernmental Relations,

Jason Loos, Deputy Secretary, Economic Policy and State Productivity, and

Terry Garwood, Deputy Secretary, First Peoples–State Relations, Department of Premier and Cabinet.

The CHAIR: I declare open this hearing of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee, and I ask that mobile telephones please be turned to silent.

I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional Aboriginal owners of the land on which we are meeting, and we pay our respects to them, their elders past, present and emerging, and any elders from other communities who may be joining us here today.

On behalf of the Parliament the committee is conducting this Inquiry into the 2023–24 Financial and Performance Outcomes. Its aim is to gauge what the government achieved in 2023–24 compared to what the government planned to achieve.

All evidence taken by the committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. However, comments repeated outside of this hearing may not be protected by this privilege. Witnesses will be provided with a proof version of the transcript to check, and verified transcripts, presentations and handouts will be placed on the committee's website.

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

I welcome the Secretary of the Department of Premier and Cabinet Mr Jeremi Moule – you are very much welcome here – as well as other officials joining us today. Secretary, I invite you to make an opening statement presentation of no more than 10 minutes, and this will be followed by questions from the committee. Your time starts now.

Jeremi MOULE: Chair, thank you. Good morning, committee members. Thank you for the opportunity to present today on behalf of the Department of Premier and Cabinet. I will join the Chair in acknowledging the traditional owners of this land and pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging.

Visual presentation.

Jeremi MOULE: DPC supports a strong, innovative and inclusive Victorian public sector. Our mission is centred on providing whole-of-government leadership and expert policy advice and delivering effective services to the Premier, our ministers, cabinet and the Victorian public. Guided by our strategic objectives, we deliver impactful and evidence-based policy advice, supporting the government's reform agenda and ensuring high standards of public administration.

Supporting me today are DPC's deputy secretaries: Joshua Puls, the Deputy Secretary for the Justice and Public Administration group; Brigid Sunderland, the Deputy Secretary of Social Policy and Intergovernmental Relations; Jason Loos, Deputy Secretary, Economic Policy and State Productivity; Terry Garwood, Deputy Secretary, First Peoples–State Relations; and Jeroen Weimar, Deputy Secretary, Housing Statement Implementation.

There have been two main changes to DPC's organisational structure this year. We welcomed multicultural affairs and the Victorian Multicultural Commission from the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, and after many years with DPC, Industrial Relations Victoria transferred to the Department of Treasury and Finance.

On the 2023–24 output performance measure results, DPC achieved strong results in 2023–24. We met 45 of 52 – or 86.5 per cent – of targets within the 5 per cent variance. I am just working my way through each of the policy groups. In 2023–24 DPC continued to support the delivery of major economic, transport, industry, energy and environment and infrastructure projects. DPC worked closely with departments to support whole-of-government cooperation with international partners to promote trade, investment, cultural and education ties; delivery of the government’s fiscal strategy and key economic policy priorities, including the building reform program; implementation of the government’s infrastructure agenda, including the Metro Tunnel, West Gate Tunnel, Suburban Rail Loop and North East Link; delivery of renewable energy transition and emissions reduction; and environmental and agricultural priorities, including the future forests program, *Victoria’s Biosecurity Strategy* and the updated *Gas Substitution Roadmap*.

On the social policy and intergovernmental relations front, DPC continued to ensure decision-makers were supported to undertake key reforms in social policy. Exercise Malevolent simulated a statewide cybersecurity incident in March, with results used to strengthen emergency management, planning and practice. *The Victorian Mentally Healthy Workplaces Framework* was delivered in December 2023, providing guidance to promote, protect and respond to mental health and wellbeing in the workplace. This included supporting the mentally healthy workplaces advisory group, co-chaired by the Premier, and the mentally healthy workplaces consultative committee. In February 2024 DPC supported the Premier’s apology to Victorians who experienced historical abuse and neglect as children in institutional care prior to 1990. DPC supported Victoria’s engagement at over 70 intergovernmental relief meetings in 2023–24, including national cabinet, the Council for the Australian Federation and other senior officials forums. DPC also supported negotiations to secure Commonwealth funding for Victoria in the National Health Reform Agreement, women’s safety, the Better and Fairer Schools Agreement and the National Agreement on Social Housing and Homelessness.

In the multicultural affairs portfolio, DPC supports people of all cultures and faiths to participate fully in life in Victoria by facilitating events, grants and programs that promote tolerance and respect in our communities. In 2023–24 DPC administered the DPC multicultural festivals and events program, helping multicultural organisations deliver 678 festivals and events. The Regional Multicultural Festivals and Events Fund supported 73 events across regional Victoria. There was \$2 million to support 1000 seniors organisations across 141 ethnic groups to foster social connection, reduce isolation and pass on heritage to future generations and \$18 million of Multicultural Community Infrastructure Fund grants, helping 83 organisations to build, maintain or upgrade infrastructure. DPC also continued support for the employment brokers programs, successfully placing 700 people in employment or training opportunities; the Victorian Anti-Racism Taskforce, which is guiding the development of a statewide anti-racism strategy; and the *Victorian African Communities Action Plan*.

On to ‘Cabinet, legal and governance’: DPC continued to provide advice to support robust public administration in 2023–24, including updates to the appointment and remuneration guidelines and public entity remuneration policy and support for the Parliamentary Workplace Standards and Integrity Bill, which passed in August 2024, acquitting 11 recommendations from the Operation Watts report and three further government commitments. The ministerial code of conduct was updated in December 2023. This strengthened conduct, integrity and probity for ministers and parliamentary secretaries, including making reporting and training obligations mandatory. The Electoral Review Expert Panel’s *Report on Victoria’s Laws on Political Finance and Electronic Assisted Voting* was tabled in March 2024.

On to ‘First Peoples – state relations’: in 2023–24 DPC continued to focus on improving outcomes for First Peoples. DPC prioritised actions to enable self-determination – that is, Aboriginal decision-making over matters affecting Aboriginal people – and to advance treaty, protect and promote cultural rights and support the truth-telling process. The key achievements for treaty in 2023–24 included five inaugural members being appointed to the Treaty Authority in December 2023. The Treaty Authority is the umpire for treaty, ensuring the process is fair for all of the negotiating parties. The state continued its good faith preparations for treaty by operationalising the whole-of-Victorian-government model for negotiating and authorising treaty. The Yoorrook Justice Commission’s land injustice and social injustice hearings were finalised in June 2024, with the Premier and other senior state witnesses giving evidence before the commission. The state provided extensive information to the commission’s land injustice inquiry, more than 4000 documents, and social injustice inquiry, over 700 documents, in response to notices to produce and requests for information issued by the commission. DPC continue to support Victoria’s commitment to closing the gap, building the foundations of shared decision-making and supporting a thriving Aboriginal community controlled organisation sector in

collaboration with our implementation partner Ngaweeyan Maar-oo. DPC also continues to maintain Victoria's world-class Aboriginal cultural heritage management system established under the *Aboriginal Heritage Act*.

In November 2023 the Victorian government finalised its response to the first principles review, which considered the implications of the Timber Creek decision for the *Traditional Owner Settlement Act* framework. The government approved 29 recommendations arising out of the review that were jointly agreed between the state and traditional owners. DPC also administered the seventh funding round of the Aboriginal community infrastructure program, with \$11 million invested across 22 First Nations organisations to develop and upgrade infrastructure. Finally, the Munarra Centre for Regional Excellence on Yorta Yorta country in Shepparton was completed in June. The design, building and running of the centre is driven by the Yorta Yorta community and is a great example of the benefits that self-determination brings to Aboriginal communities.

On housing statement implementation, the government's housing program is vast, spanning building, planning, rental, institutional investors, government land and precincts, and First Peoples' interests. This is a complex area of policy that requires a whole-of-government response and coordination to ensure we partner with industry to increase the supply of housing. Following the release of the housing statement in late 2023, a new coordination function was established in DPC in February 2024. The coordination function is responsible for identifying and resolving cross-portfolio issues and opportunities, engaging with industry on the entire housing agenda and providing advice to government in relation to what can be done to enable more houses to get built.

Finally, just to reflect on some of DPC's People Matter survey results for 2023–24, 479 people, or about 85 per cent of DPC staff, responded to the People Matter survey in 2024. This was the highest participation rate across VPS departments. Staff engagement and job satisfaction remained strong, with inclusion and manager leadership results both strengthened further. Staff also indicated senior leaders are better demonstrating honesty, integrity and organisational values as well as providing clarity on strategy and direction. This is reflected in a broad number of DPS staff that agreed that their work was meaningful and enriching, indicating they feel their work is worthwhile, have a sense of autonomy and contribute to organisational goals.

Chair, that brings me to the conclusion of my presentation. We are happy to take questions from the committee.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Secretary. I love people that are right on time or a little bit early. The first round of questions is going to go to the Deputy Chair.

Nick McGOWAN: Thank you. Thank you, Secretary. Secretary, we understand that in October 2023 DPC had monthly meetings with DTF and the Suburban Rail Loop Authority to discuss the SRL issues, including funding. Given this, DPC would I guess be intimately aware of the progress of the SRL East project. Where is the project tracking at the moment in terms of its budget?

Jeremi MOULE: I will ask Mr Loos to answer the question in detail, but DPC and DTF have regular interdepartmental meetings in relation to the SRL and other matters, so it is a pretty conventional approach for us in relation to major projects, but I will ask Mr Loos to answer your question in detail.

Jason LOOS: Thanks, Secretary. Thank you for the question. The SRL business and investment case was released back in August 2021, and from that point DTF has been leading on the funding and financing strategy. The strategy consists of three components: a third from the state government, a third from value capture mechanisms and a third from the Commonwealth government. Each of those are at various parts of the analysis, so a lot of work has happened on value capture and government decisions are to be made on that. Discussions are still happening between state and federal government additional to the \$2.2 billion allocation that the Commonwealth has already committed to, and the state government has already in the forward estimates contributed its one-third share. In terms of –

Nick McGOWAN: Sorry, has the Commonwealth already given you the \$2.2 billion?

Jason LOOS: It has committed to the \$2.2 billion.

Nick McGOWAN: But it has not given it to you yet.

Jason LOOS: Committed.

Nick McGOWAN: When do you receive that money?

Jason LOOS: We have got a cash flow estimate that we are continuing to discuss with the Commonwealth.

Nick McGOWAN: When do you estimate you will receive that money?

Jason LOOS: Those are still discussions that are happening.

Nick McGOWAN: You said you have an estimate. What is the estimate?

Jason LOOS: A third of the funding from the Commonwealth, so it is basically \$11.5 billion, each of those thirds.

Nick McGOWAN: But for the \$2.2 billion you estimate they are going to give you, when do you estimate –

Jason LOOS: They have committed to the \$2.2 billion.

Nick McGOWAN: But they have not disbursed it to you, so when do you anticipate disbursement to you?

Jason LOOS: We have got a cash flow assumption in our numbers.

Nick McGOWAN: I understand that. I am asking what the assumption is.

Jason LOOS: Well, I think it is over the next few years.

Nick McGOWAN: Twenty dollars a week, or how does it work?

Jason LOOS: No, there is a breakdown. You have got a cash flow profile of the costs and then you have a cash flow profile of the revenues, and those meet.

Nick McGOWAN: I understand all that. I am just asking a very basic question: your assumptions in terms of when they are going to give you the \$2.2 billion, when will you have that money in the bank?

Jeremi MOULE: Mr McGowan, I think that Mr Loos is attempting to answer your question as best he can, but the reality is that these are matters that are advice to government from DPC, which is difficult for us to go into in this forum. But at some point the aim is to reach an agreement with the Commonwealth about when those funds will be made available to the state, but obviously the Commonwealth has made that commitment.

Nick McGOWAN: There is no agreement, though, when you will receive that from the Commonwealth – is that what I am hearing?

Jeremi MOULE: No, we have not reached that agreement yet. That is correct.

Nick McGOWAN: So there is no agreement for the \$2.2 billion from the Commonwealth?

Jason LOOS: There is a commitment that they will provide the \$2.2 billion.

Nick McGOWAN: What is the difference between the words ‘commitment’ and ‘agreement’?

Jeremi MOULE: Well, that is exactly the detail you are asking about, which is the cash flowing of that money into our accounts. That is subject to negotiation still and discussion with the Commonwealth.

Nick McGOWAN: Just so I am clear, as we sit here today you are saying to me that the Commonwealth government – Prime Minister Albanese – has said, ‘I will give you \$2.2 billion’?

Jeremi MOULE: That is correct, and that is a fairly regular process for the Commonwealth to commit to funding and then for the detail of that funding – whether it is an infrastructure project like SRL or other things – then to be worked out between officials and then agreed between the two governments.

Nick McGOWAN: As far as you are aware, in the forward estimates of the Commonwealth government budget have they identified when that money will be dispersed to you – in their documentation?

Jeremi MOULE: I think it is sitting in a contingency. We might need to take that question on notice.

Nick McGOWAN: If you could take it on notice, thank you. In respect to the value capture, what work has been done? Because obviously that is a third and you are saying that is in the order of \$11 billion. When can we expect the legislation to enact that?

Jeremi MOULE: The value capture work is being led by DTF. Obviously as DPC we have some visibility of that work, but it is right that at some point the government will need to make its final decisions in relation to the value capture model and make those announcements, and where necessary, if there is legislative change required, then bring that forward to the Parliament.

Nick McGOWAN: Do you know when that will be?

Jeremi MOULE: We are not able to estimate that at the moment because that is a matter for future government decision-making.

Nick McGOWAN: In the life of this government do you expect that legislation to be brought forward?

Jeremi MOULE: I could not say. It is not my role to tell you when legislation will be brought to the Parliament.

Nick McGOWAN: I appreciate that, but in terms of your planning, certainly from the budget perspective in terms of when you need to have things online and so forth, because obviously there is a long lead time here, is there anticipation that it has to happen in the next 12, 24 months?

Jeremi MOULE: I do not think we are – from a cash flow perspective for the project, I think that –

Jason LOOS: The state's \$11.5 billion that has already gone in is in there for the first part of the forward estimates, and then the value capture and the Commonwealth government comes in, so you have a bit of time to work through how you fund the different packages.

Nick McGOWAN: What do you budget or forecast that you will actually spend between now and the next election on this project?

Jeremi MOULE: The budgeting of the project is not detail that we are responsible for, so it is either a question for DTF or for DTP.

Nick McGOWAN: I understand that, but as you say, you have got this coordinating role and this oversight. You would want to make sure that there is enough money going forward from a whole-of-government perspective. What are you anticipating you will need to provision for the next 24 months to make sure that you have enough that you need? Obviously there are two major contracts signed. What else are we looking at?

Jason LOOS: We base our cash flow – or Treasury bases their cash flow forecast based on the forecast expenditure that will flow from, as you say, the packages that have been committed to and contracted to, and they are at various stages. So as you say, some have already reached contract close and a certain amount of work will happen over the next two financial years associated with that, so the budget has allocated an estimate of what that is.

Nick McGOWAN: Do you know what the largest risks are associated with the project? Have you managed to identify those?

Jason LOOS: Well, in terms of construction, it has been a pretty challenging time coming out of COVID and with escalation and labour market challenges, so that has definitely been a key risk that governments and we are watching across the whole capital program, and it continues to be something that we place a lot of emphasis on.

Nick McGOWAN: So what do you now budget the east part of the project to be fully costed at?

Jason LOOS: That is still at the cost of between \$30 billion and \$34.5 billion.

Nick McGOWAN: That has not exceeded the \$34.5 billion?

Jason LOOS: No, because when you come up with cost estimates initially there is always a level of contingency within those estimates.

Nick McGOWAN: And in the contracts you have signed to date, do you have any exit clauses in those contracts?

Jeremi MOULE: That is not really a matter that we can answer, Mr McGowan. I think that is a matter for the SRL.

Nick McGOWAN: So you have not seen the contracts – the DPC has not seen the contracts?

Jeremi MOULE: We would have seen them and provided our advice to the Premier on those matters and also as various decisions have been made on the way through, but it is not really information that belongs to us. It is best directed to the SRL Authority.

Nick McGOWAN: We spoke a little bit earlier about the meetings between yourselves and DTF and so forth. Are you able to share a copy of the minutes, of the agenda, circulated documents for any of those meetings?

Jeremi MOULE: To the extent to which they go to matters that were on a pathway to cabinet consideration – certainly those matters would not be available for public release at this time – and matters that went particularly to advice that we might have been preparing for the Premier or relevant ministers and the Treasurer in relation to that. There is probably some other generic material that would be subject to release; I would need to look. As I said in my opening response to your first question, Mr McGowan, it is fairly conventional for the DPC and DTF to be on interdepartmental committees, either formally or more informally where there is just a gathering of departments, for oversight of major initiatives, whether they are infrastructure or other things.

Nick McGOWAN: Secretary, the briefing note for May's PAEC session prepared by DPC notes that Victoria is experiencing a transport construction boom with \$100 billion investment delivering over 180 major road and rail projects. Is your department going to be working in respect to whether this \$100 billion spend contributes in any way to inflation?

Jeremi MOULE: I think if any of that analysis had been done, it would have been done by DTF.

Nick McGOWAN: Okay. It has not been shared with you? You have not inquired? DPC do not contemplate what impact that might have on the economy?

Jeremi MOULE: I will ask Mr Loos to answer, but it is work that we would expect DTF to do insofar as it is relevant to decision-making.

Nick McGOWAN: Sure.

Jason LOOS: Over the last 24 months we have been very conscious of the capital spend and making sure that that is profiled in a way to pick the risk that I mentioned before about the labour market and escalation. In that context we are aware of it and trying to make sure that we smooth that as best as we can.

Nick McGOWAN: How can you be certain that your expenditure does not actually push up the cost of residential construction?

Jason LOOS: I think we need to just make sure that when we go out with projects, whether it is residential construction or Big Build or engineering projects, that we do do the work up-front to make sure that the supply chain and the labour market is actually there to support the delivery of the project. We do that with the department in question who is accountable for the actual construction of the project. That is part of the coordination role that we try and play.

Nick McGOWAN: Does the department also have any oversight in respect to the NELP project, Secretary?

Jeremi MOULE: Yes, a similar function, Mr McGowan, where along with DTF we are involved in periodical or regular meetings with the department and the delivery agency in relation to NELP. Obviously as

any decisions come through for funding or contracts and the like then our normal briefing processes on those would kick in.

Nick McGOWAN: Since we have last met has there been any further additional cost blowouts on that project? I know it went from – what was the original cost projection? I think it was \$4 billion to \$6 billion, wasn't it? I know that is fairly –

Jeremi MOULE: I am not aware of any material updates since the midyear budget update last December. Am I right in saying that?

Jason LOOS: That is right.

Jeremi MOULE: Yes, thank you.

Nick McGOWAN: Refresh my memory.

Jason LOOS: The original budget in 2019–20 committed \$15.8 billion to deliver the –

Nick McGOWAN: What was the project originally costed at back in the – \$5 billion, \$4 billion? It was close to that.

Jason LOOS: I am not sure if that was North East Link.

Nick McGOWAN: I am positive it was. What is the total cost now, projected?

Jason LOOS: There are the two packages. You have got the primary package and then you have got the supporting package.

Nick McGOWAN: Let us assume the packages cannot go without each other. What is the total cost?

Jeremi MOULE: I did not bring a copy of last year's midyear budget update with me. We can take that on notice, or you can ask DTP when you see them.

Nick McGOWAN: I am happy for you to take it on notice.

Nick McGOWAN: I think it is close to \$26 billion, but I am just wanting to make sure we are still talking about the same figure for a 10-kilometre stretch of road.

Bev McARTHUR: Anyway, are you taking it on notice?

Nick McGOWAN: Yes, are you happy to take that on notice? The figure as it stands today for the beloved, gold-plated –

Jeremi MOULE: We can provide you with the published figure in the midyear budget update from last December.

Nick McGOWAN: 10 kilometres of a tunnel in the wrong space in Victoria. Yes, that would be great. In respect to the SRL, I think there was an email that went around, wasn't there, Mr Loos, that talked about the changes to the project. I am happy to refresh your memory, but there was an FFS one-pager. This was an email that was sent on 10 October to ministerial staff with an attachment called 'FFS one-pager', which outlined the changes to the SRL project. Do you recall what those changes were?

Jeremi MOULE: I do not recall the email.

Jason LOOS: Yes, neither do I.

Jeremi MOULE: Can you give more context, Mr McGowan?

Nick McGOWAN: I will ask for some more context, and I will come back to you on that.

Danny O'BRIEN: We can tell you it was sent, as you said, on 10 October by Mr Loos:

Please find attached a one-page comparison of the SRL – redacted –

... changes. Hopefully this will assist by way of background and we will continue to follow up with DTF on status and next steps.

It was sent to ministerial officers that are also redacted on 10 October with an attachment called ‘FFS one-pager’. I do not know what FFS stands for – maybe what someone said when they found out how much it is going to cost.

Jason LOOS: Well, FFS stands for funding and financing strategy.

Danny O’BRIEN: Right. I was wrong then.

Jeremi MOULE: I think the email you are referring to then is communication between departments in relation to the funding and finance strategy development, which we were speaking about earlier, which is being prepared for government decision-making. It sounds like it is in the context of those discussions.

Nick McGOWAN: Secretary, has DPC engaged the legal firm Ashurst for any work, specifically in respect to the Suburban Rail Loop?

Jeremi MOULE: Not that I am aware of. The name does not ring a bell.

Nick McGOWAN: Do you mind just checking for us and taking that on notice?

Jeremi MOULE: I think we might have listed all of our consultancies in the questionnaire, so we will try to check that in the running, Mr McGowan.

Nick McGOWAN: I note that you have also got some responsibility for the oversight of the ministerial code of conduct. Have there been any breaches of the code of conduct?

Jeremi MOULE: Mr McGowan, my answer to your question is that we have not been asked to advise on any and we are not aware of any.

Nick McGOWAN: Does that include for both ministers and secretaries?

Jeremi MOULE: As in parliamentary secretaries or department secretaries, Mr McGowan?

Nick McGOWAN: I understood it to relate to department secretaries, but I could be wrong.

Jeremi MOULE: No, sorry, the code of conduct does not apply to department secretaries, but elements of it do apply to parliamentary secretaries.

Nick McGOWAN: As far as you are aware, have there been any breaches of the code by either parliamentary secretaries or ministers?

Jeremi MOULE: No.

Nick McGOWAN: In terms of the reporting requirements that they have, have they all complied with those reporting requirements, both ministers and parliamentary secretaries?

Jeremi MOULE: Yes. The new disclosure arrangements and reporting requirements – and the biggest ticket item amongst those is the publication of ministerial diaries – have all been complied with and are available on the website.

Nick McGOWAN: And in terms of the training they are both required to undertake, have all ministers and parliamentary secretaries complied with the required training in the time specified? No-one has been tardy or late as far as you are aware? Because there is always someone that is late, right?

Joshua PULS: I could not comment on the timeliness, but certainly I know everyone has done it.

Jeremi MOULE: We might have had some last-minute rescheduling given the ministerial diaries, but everyone has completed what was required of them in a timely way.

Nick McGOWAN: A timely way. Can I have the department come back to us – if any of you do not have this at hand, which I do not expect you to necessarily, but certainly we all have been in a position where we are asked to something by a certain date and time, whether it be training – about which ministers were able to fulfill their obligations and which ministers were not, and parliamentary secretaries the same.

Secretary, I would like to take you, if I can, to advice provided around pill testing. Prior to August 2023 did the department provide any advice in relation to pill testing?

Jeremi MOULE: We would likely have provided advice if it were a matter being considered by government, Mr McGowan. I am answering your question cautiously. I do not know from a timing perspective, but over the journey we have provided advice in relation to pill testing.

Nick McGOWAN: Do you know whether that advice was supportive of pill testing or to the contrary?

Jeremi MOULE: I am not in a position to disclose the nature of the advice that we provide to the executive.

Nick McGOWAN: Did the advice from the department change with the change of Premier?

Jeremi MOULE: No. The evidence base on which we would have based our advice would have remained the same.

Nick McGOWAN: Likewise, in respect to the advice you would have provided in respect to raising the age of criminal responsibility, did change at all coming from the department?

Jeremi MOULE: No, it would not have.

Nick McGOWAN: So the government would have changed its position despite the advice you would have provided, one would take.

Jeremi MOULE: I cannot go to what our advice would have said either way at the time, Mr McGowan, but obviously the executive is in a position to be able to make decisions about its policy position on matters and from time to time change those.

Nick McGOWAN: Can you tell me – this is the perennial question – what the total expenditure for government was on advertising and content development for the Premier's Facebook and other social media accounts?

Jeremi MOULE: We do not incur or have visibility of any costs in relation to the content that appears on the Premier's Facebook or other social media accounts – and this is for the period spanning both Premier Andrews and Premier Allan. We do have visibility of the advertising expenditure, the cost of advertising for those, which is the data that I most frequently provide here. I can tell you that for Meta, which is both Facebook and Instagram, because the Premier's office does not hold a credit card we pay for those on our credit card and it is journalled to the department from the Premier's accounts. In 2023–24 the Premier's office spent \$120,854 on advertising through Meta accounts.

Danny O'BRIEN: Do you have other social media as well?

Jeremi MOULE: None that we pay bills for, so we do not have any visibility in relation to others. But if the requirement was for them to be paid using a credit card, there would be a need for that transaction to take place and be reimbursed through the department.

Nick McGOWAN: Could the Premier's private office be paying for other social media and claiming that either by reimbursement or through that budget?

Jeremi MOULE: Not through reimbursement. If DPC had any role in paying a bill and it then being journalled – those funds from the Premier's budget – we would have visibility of that. But in terms of social media, Meta is the only account that we are aware that the Premier uses.

Nick McGOWAN: And are you aware of any other expenditure by the Premier's private office with respect to social media?

Jeremi MOULE: No. I am not.

Nick McGOWAN: Does the Premier's private office have a separate budget line that allows them to advertise – if they wanted to advertise in the *Herald Sun*, for example?

Jeremi MOULE: I do not think they do. I mean, the funds that are appropriated to the Premier's office and to ministerial offices are then managed by them, so we do not necessarily have visibility of that.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Secretary. We are going to go straight to Mr Galea.

Michael GALEA: Thanks, Chair. Good morning, Secretary and officials; thank you for joining us. Indeed there are many great things I could talk about just from what the Deputy Chair was talking about, whether it is North East Link or the Suburban Rail Loop or one of the many other well over 100 transformational projects that we are building that I know DPC has some sort of oversight role over. However, Secretary, I would like to ask you about something equally as important but that got much less profile this year and in the financial year at which we are looking, and that was the Premier's apology to past care leavers, which was undertaken in February of this year and is referenced on page 24 of DPC's annual report. Secretary, what role did the department have in facilitating and delivering that important apology?

Jeremi MOULE: Mr Galea, thank you for your question. I will ask Ms Sunderland to – is this yours? Thank you.

Brigid SUNDERLAND: Thank you for the question. Obviously that was a terribly significant event, that apology, and it has been many years in the making. We worked very closely with the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing. They obviously supported us in developing some of the text around the apology in close consultation with victim-survivors and community to make sure that the Premier was well placed to be supportive and make the right comments in Parliament. In that sense you [inaudible] such a painful experience for those care leavers, and it was a responsibility the state took very seriously in terms of our role in that.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. You are quite right on the point that the words which are used, especially in these contexts, are so important – you do not want to be saying things off the cuff that might be offending people or anything else. It is good to know obviously that work that has gone in from DPC and DFFH as you mentioned as well – I think they are coming to see us on Friday. But I think that came through. The Premier always speaks well, but I think that definitely came through in the language that was used by the Premier and how important that is, so that is really good feedback. Thank you.

Secretary, this may be for another official, but the mentally healthy workplaces framework was something that you also mentioned in your presentation. Can you tell me a little bit more about this and the role that DPC had?

Jeremi MOULE: Thank you. I will ask Ms Sunderland to answer that question.

Brigid SUNDERLAND: Sorry, can I just ask you to repeat the question?

Jeremi MOULE: Mentally healthy workplaces.

Brigid SUNDERLAND: Yes. That is some work that we did highlight in the annual report, and DPC played quite a key role in the development of those frameworks and tools. We had an advisory group that was co-chaired by the Premier, Victorian Chamber of Commerce and Victorian Trades Hall Council secretary, with many sector partners, industry partners and union partners. Some of the work there, though, was really around responding to the royal commission report, so it was quite a clear direction from the royal commission about the work that they felt needed to be done to make sure that workplaces were mentally safe – safe places for people's mental health. They delivered a framework which is available online and with multiple tools to assist employers to progress safety education, wellbeing, inclusion and performance within the workplace. WorkSafe obviously has a key role to play there too, so we are guided by their expertise, and there are a number of key foundational features I might just take you through, if you are comfortable.

In terms of promoting and recognising the positive aspects of a workplace, it is what those strength-based features of a workplace that is healthy look like and making sure that we can replicate that at scale. So we get guidance around what works, what has been demonstrated to make a difference and how we protect people – what does that look like when things do go wrong, and how do we step in and make sure that people are supported and responding? So it is having the best practices in place for when someone is not well in the workplace, and as I said, there are a number of tools. We have got a strategy and action plan, and we have got a return-to-work tool, looking at different placement opportunities when people do return to work, whether it is a casual role or different tasks or duties that are supportive to that person returning to the workplace. We are very careful then about how we facilitate that work and provide the tools so that when employers are bringing people back into the workplace they have some mechanisms and strategies to do that. So that is all available, as I said, publicly. I think it was launched in December with various fact sheets, and my understanding is it has been well utilised.

Michael GALEA: It has been well utilised? Excellent.

Brigid SUNDERLAND: Yes, that is my understanding.

Michael GALEA: Definitely from my previous role prior to politics, I know about supporting people in their workplaces and the impact that these sorts of things can have. It is really good to see something that is going to be so valuable in getting these things addressed, hopefully at the earlier point, which is going to have a transformational impact on people's recovery. That is really encouraging to hear. Sorry, Ms Sunderland, I think this is going to be for you as well.

Brigid SUNDERLAND: No, that is all right. Happy to take it.

Michael GALEA: I am picking on you this morning, it seems. Intergovernmental relations were talked about in the presentation as well, and I believe, Secretary, you mentioned that there were well over 70 meetings or other events coordinated by DPC over the outcomes period of 2023–24, which we are looking at. I am curious to know, particularly with regards to engagement with the Commonwealth government on the issue of women's safety and family violence, what sort of work has been done in that space. Because of the many policy issues that are multilayered, this is one in particular that requires that multilevel response from all levels of government.

Jeremi MOULE: If I might make a couple of remarks then ask Ms Sunderland to continue – just to give you a break. Certainly the role that DPC plays in intergovernmental relations is a critical one. National cabinet meets three to four times a year, and the lead-up to those meetings is fairly significant, particularly as we have been working through several significant intergovernmental agreements over the course of this year that expire in the near term. Critically, schools, health and the Commonwealth's reforms to disability care are the really big-ticket items over the course of the year. But of course, one of the national cabinet meetings earlier this year was dedicated to women's safety – and each state and territory did quite a bit of work in the lead-up to that in conjunction with the Commonwealth – and then there were some significant announcements made as part of that. I might ask Ms Sunderland to go into some detail in relation to that.

Brigid SUNDERLAND: Thank you. I can take you through the partnership agreements that we are currently finalising. They were the outcomes of the 6 September national cabinet meeting and the Commonwealth investment in family violence and legal assistance, but there were also other streams of work that we progressed through states and territories. To be honest, we are going through some of the findings from the royal commission in Victoria and the reforms that we have initiated and working with other states and territories around some of that best practice around risk assessment, multiagency work and the central information point. But I can speak to a bit of that detail.

In terms of the partnerships, though, it was approximately \$600 million for Victoria on the National Access to Justice Partnership. We are working through that with the Commonwealth at the moment as we finalise the documentation, but it was a significant agreement from all states and territories achieved at that national cabinet meeting around legal assistance with a particular focus around women fleeing violence and women who need support through the criminal justice system, which we know is a terribly fraught process at times for people who are at a very vulnerable stage of their lives. So it is looking at making sure we have got the legal assistance properly funded so that there is adequate support for women experiencing that. Then we had an extension and a

five-year renewal of the national partnership on domestic and sexual violence. That had been a program that had sort of been funded for two years and then a year – so sporadic funding from the federal government – and that is now being expanded to a five-year agreement, which is significant for the family violence sector because that gives them funding certainty in the sense of being able to recruit. In challenging workforce times they can get more ongoing roles and really build up that sector with a bit more financial certainty. So we are finalising those agreements at the moment, and then separately we progressed work through the various committees underpinning national cabinet. There are lots of – as we said, 70 – meetings, and we really are sort of showcasing the work that we have led around risk assessment, looking at multiagency players coming together and really understanding through validated risk assessment tools. We had that work done a few years ago, and it has really shown quite significant results. We are getting much better sensitivity analysis around risk for women and exactly what is going on for them and their children, and then making sure that the case management we put in place is addressing the risks, so really keeping women safe and their children. We were able to showcase that with other jurisdictions, and that was really well received. Other jurisdictions are looking at how they can replicate some of the work that we have been leading in Victoria.

The other critical part of that is the information-sharing piece, making sure that when we are doing the risk assessment we have all the right information to undertake that risk assessment, so drawing it from police or from courts or corrections so that we have got the most current picture of the situation that the woman might be facing and then addressing safety planning around that. That was another piece of work that we showcased with other jurisdictions.

Jeremi MOULE: Mr Galea, I think, on the point that Ms Sunderland touched on in terms of other jurisdictions and certainly initially at the officials level, what we have seen since the family violence royal commission is the building particularly of new services that were delivered and functions within Victoria. They have now been operational for such a period of time that we can demonstrate which things are working particularly well, and they are then of interest to other states and territories. And although there are significant jurisdictional differences in this space – so it is a little bit different in each state and territory – there are certainly some significant aspects of the reform that we are implementing in Victoria that have been of great interest. Certainly Western Australia has spent a lot of time with our officials and earlier this year, this calendar year, made some significant announcements around reforms in support of women in family violence situations in Western Australia. A lot of that does replicate, or modify for their circumstances, many of the things that have been implemented here in Victoria. So we are proud of that, but of course there is still a lot of work to be done.

Michael GALEA: I was actually going to ask about that, because we have so many different frameworks in different states, and just yesterday we were talking with DEECA about horse traceability, of all things, and how Victoria is leading the nation on that and able to share some of our learnings and experiences of that with other jurisdictions. And indeed with the very important issue of biosecurity risks, such as the avian flu outbreak, that is one of those key areas where we can both exchange what we know with other states but also, importantly, learn from them. Are there any other particular areas in which Victoria has benefited from these intergovernmental relationships – any particular policy areas, such as that or such as with the very important issue of women's safety and domestic violence, which have actually informed better outcomes from having those relationships?

Jeremi MOULE: I think you are right to describe the learnings that go on, particularly at an initial stage, between officials in states and territories. Regardless of the nature of the government of the day in any one of those jurisdictions, it is a really collaborative relationship, and we are keen to always be sharing information about things that worked well – and things that have not, because that is equally important – with other jurisdictions. Probably the most significant thing that the Council for the Australian Federation, which is when the states and territories come together without the Commonwealth, have been working on is to make sure that where possible we find common ground in relation to some of the really significant national partnership agreements. Something like the health agreement has enormous ramifications for every state and territory, and it is again because of the different nature of the systems that exist in each state and territory that it can be difficult to find that common ground and therefore a really compelling advocacy to the Commonwealth for things that we think should be in the agreement or levels of funding or whatever the issue might be. I was previously the deputy that had responsibility for intergovernmental relations and then certainly in this role as Secretary of the Premier's department. That has been a really consistent thing. As governments change and as secretaries change in departments in other states and territories, that work is just ongoing and I think is of great

benefit to all states and territories when it comes to advocacy with the Commonwealth. I am not sure if there are any other specific policy matters that you might all want to –

Brigid SUNDERLAND: In terms of agreements, if you want me to take you through, in the financial year, the national agreement on social housing and homelessness – that was also finalised – there was \$2.4 billion for Victoria there. So that is the funding for the public housing system, various access points and emergency accommodation crisis response. That was a piece of work that we supported or worked on with Homes Victoria and DFFH, securing that agreement and those funds for Victoria. Importantly, under that negotiation, or as a result of that negotiation, the housing support program priority work streams funding of \$248 million as a one-off payment was made to Victoria for some enabling works, enabling infrastructure works for social housing. That was a significant achievement as well in that last financial year. As the Secretary has pointed out, there were also, in health, multiple opportunities to work with other jurisdictions and common challenges that we are all facing in how we move towards better outcomes, whether it be in health or disability.

Michael GALEA: And the ability to bind together to lobby for what is needed from the Commonwealth government sometimes, I am sure, as well. You mentioned earlier the five-year renewal partnership for domestic violence, which has also been derived through this process, and you spoke about the importance of funding security for a lot of these organisations delivering these services so that they can make those longer term decisions. Beyond the stability that it will provide for the sector by having a five-year partnership, what are the other benefits that partnership will deliver?

Brigid SUNDERLAND: In terms of providing more frontline care, that will go directly into the frontline workforce, who are working incredibly hard. Demand is high. When we start to do more awareness raising – and this has occurred following the royal commission – more people will come forward and report, and that is a good thing. But it also imposes additional burden and demand on the sector, so for us to be able to actually properly support the frontline sector for the work that they do was an incredible outcome. We also see important initiatives – for example, Safe at Home and some of these initiatives that can keep women safe in their own homes, put security infrastructure around them, duress alarms and that kind of thing, so that women can stay at home rather than need to leave home in order to be safe. That is much better, not just for them but for their children, who will be in school and connected to local community and neighbours, making sure that they are not the ones who have to leave that protective world around them. That sort of really direct frontline impact is significant, but also on the perpetrator side some of that funding will go to men's behaviour change programs, making sure we have got the best evidence to make sure we are rolling out the right programs that are effective and making sure we have got the workforce. That is a particularly skilled workforce. It is particularly difficult. Obviously, as you can imagine, that work is not easy, so it is about making sure they are adequately trained and supported to do that work and that we can meet the demand, because when someone does want to change their behaviour, it is important that we have the services there to support them to do that.

Michael GALEA: To actually help them to do that.

Brigid SUNDERLAND: Absolutely, yes.

Michael GALEA: Wonderful. Thank you. Secretary, if I can move to some of the other partnerships engaged in by DPC, notably with some of our cultural exchange organisations, such as the Australia Indian Institute and the Asia Society, these are all listed towards the back or the middle of the department's annual report as well as some of the funding outputs that have been delivered to these organisations. What sorts of outcomes have been achieved through these partnerships?

Jeremi MOULE: Thank you. I will ask Mr Loos to answer in relation to those two specific agreements, but the role of DPC in supporting the Premier, particularly around engagement with specific international markets, is a significant one. People would be aware the Premier recently travelled to India, but more broadly than that, the importance of our near neighbours, particularly when it comes to trade, students and visitation, is really significant. The department has worked on a couple of country-specific strategies that we do in partnership with our Victorian representatives who are based in-country in these markets as well. I will ask Mr Loos to go to some detail about the specific agreements you mentioned.

Jason LOOS: Thanks, Secretary. Just some opening comments: it is the opportunity that we can create for Victorian businesses in particular in Asia and South-East Asia where the links of these type of arrangements are

really important. In terms of the Asia Society, a number of initiatives and events were designed to try and strengthen Victoria's engagement with Asia. There was the hosting of the Asia Briefing LIVE 2023 in Melbourne, which brought together a whole lot of political and business leaders, policy thinkers and strategists, entrepreneurs and technology experts effectively to discuss the challenges of Victoria, Australia and also Asia. There are a lot of common factors that when you have these discussions we can learn and build from each other. There was delivering the Melbourne Asia Game Changer Awards in December 2023; that recognised leaders and change makers whose work had a positive influence on the South-East Asian region. Then there was the support for the Australian ASEAN summit in 2024, which was a significant event here. We got senior business and politicians from the whole of the Asian region coming here and a lot of links were created. We worked with the Commonwealth government on that event. Then delivering the Emerging Leaders Forum 2024 again brought together emerging leaders from Asian countries here in Victoria. So it is very much about creating links and working on policies that are important to both governments.

In terms of the Australia India Institute, again there is significant opportunity there in India. The Premier and Secretary recently visited India. They also delivered a number of policy briefs on opportunities for increasing air connectivity between India and Victoria, defence technology and collaboration between Victorian and Indian companies, so again it is about connecting the business leaders. The big event that was held was the Australia India Leadership Dialogue in Melbourne back in November 2023, which brought together again leaders from government and business. That was held here and again a great outcome in terms of connections. And we do have businesses that do come back. We work very closely with DJSIR in terms of the whole international engagement, and we obviously use very strategically posted commissioners in the regions as well and just try to ensure the commissioners are clear on the Victorian government priorities. We talked about supply chain issues previously – how we can actually use international expertise to help us solve some of our issues. So a bunch of those partnerships have been very worthwhile.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. With the few seconds I have left, Secretary, how was India?

Jeremi MOULE: It was great.

The CHAIR: Good answer. We are going to go over to Mrs McArthur.

Bev McARTHUR: Thank you, Chair. Now, Commander Weimar – Deputy Secretary, sorry, I still see you as Commander – on the last occasion you were here before this committee I asked you how you were tracking with your 80,000 from the housing statement, and you rather facetiously told me you did not build houses. Now, I accept you do not personally get on the tools, so I am just wondering if you can tell us now exactly how many of the 80,000 per annum houses your builders have built.

Jeroen WEIMAR: Thank you, Mrs McArthur. Since the release of the housing statement in September 2023, the ABS data does not quite match up to those timelines, but our estimate is 70,707 homes have been built across Victoria in the first 12 or 13 months since the statement was released.

Bev McARTHUR: Okay. So how many houses will you build in Victoria every year?

Jeroen WEIMAR: We have a target of 800,000 homes to be built in the first decade after release of the housing statement.

Bev McARTHUR: Eighty thousand in the first decade?

Jeroen WEIMAR: No, 800,000 homes.

Bev McARTHUR: Eight hundred thousand.

Jeroen WEIMAR: It is the target that was clearly set out in the housing statement – the target to which we are working – and it is a strong target. It is 800,000 homes over the first 10 years. We have now completed the first 13, 14 months of that period. We accept absolutely that we issued the statement at a point at which the housing industry, the housing supply industry, was at a significant low – a period like that we have not seen for about 15, 16 years – but we are seeing some interesting signs. The last 12 months data from the ABS indicates an increase of around 8 per cent on the completion rate in Victoria. Victoria has now built and completed more homes in the last 12 months than it did before. We are now back over 60,000 homes per annum. We have not

been there for a couple of years. So whilst there is a long way to go, there is a lot of work to do, we are seeing some very early signs that the reforms that are in place and a lot of hard work across the industry is starting to have some effect.

Bev McARTHUR: So what is the square metre cost of building an apartment?

Jeroen WEIMAR: It depends what kind of an apartment one is building, and it depends where one is building it. Certainly if you speak to developers – as I do extensively; I have had a lot of meetings with developers over the last nine months or so, about 130 of them – their advice is that typically construction costs per square metre can range anything from around \$11,000 per square metre to about \$13,000 per square metre. But of course it depends what the format of the building is, the height of the building, the quality of the fit-out and the number of rooms, but that is the kind of range that we are in: probably about \$11,000 to \$13,000 per square metre.

Bev McARTHUR: What about the square metre cost for a detached home?

Jeroen WEIMAR: Forgive me, Mrs McArthur, I am not a building surveyor, but I think what I would recognise is that currently if you are looking at detached home costs, they can go as low as about \$300,000, \$350,000 – again, depending where we build, where the land is, the cost of assembly and the cost of site preparation et cetera.

Bev McARTHUR: So the industry, Deputy Secretary, including the HIA, the UDIA and other groups, have confirmed that it is more expensive to build a high-density apartment building compared with the square metre cost of building a new detached home. Why then is the housing strategy aiming to build more high-density apartment buildings if the aim is to improve housing affordability?

Jeroen WEIMAR: Mrs McArthur, I think the housing statement and of course the subsequent reforms that we have been developing and that were announced a few weeks ago focus on supporting all aspects of the home building industry. In the greenfield industry we have achieved for the first time ever a 10-year plan for the development of greenfields, so it is very much detached houses as well as townhouses that we are now seeing emerging in the greenfields, and we recognise the importance of the greenfield product to the wider Melbourne and Victorian housing market. We are also seeing strong greenfield markets in Geelong, outside Ballarat, even in some other parts of regional Victoria. So it remains a very important market, and that is why we have a number of reforms, including as I say, the greenfield plan that is around that. At the same time, we also need to encourage and enable higher density homes within established parts of Melbourne and within other, regional, cities, and we are seeing certainly significant reforms taking place and interest from developers in doing that.

If I take you to one example: we are now at the RFP stage for four parcels of government-owned land in particularly the northern suburbs – Preston and Coburg – and we are seeing significant interest from medium-scale apartment developers to come in and build affordable apartments on those kinds of locations. So there is an appetite in the industry to build. There is a desire to give options to Victorians looking to buy their first home. I think the role of our housing program is to encourage every part of the housing sector and to look towards building more affordable homes across our city and across Victoria.

Bev McARTHUR: As per the government's forecast, will property prices decrease due to the Premier's housing policies?

Jeroen WEIMAR: Property prices have already softened somewhat of course over the last couple of years. I think we saw the peak of the median house prices at well over a million dollars per home in Melbourne in late 2021. We are now looking at a median price in Melbourne around the \$916,000 mark. So we have seen the softening of median house prices. What we are also seeing is signs of more listings in the market. I think back in October we saw the largest number of house listings in the Victorian market that we have seen for probably about 10, 15 years. So there are signs that we are seeing house prices soften, which is what we expect to see. We are seeing significant signs that first home buyers are now the biggest share of the market, and Victoria has the largest number of first home buyers entering into the market. Of course that is all part of the longer term changes that we are trying to encourage and enable.

Bev McARTHUR: We have a major housing crisis in rural Victoria; we cannot get workers because we do not have houses. We do not normally have 20-storey apartment buildings being built in rural towns, so how is your rollout of housing going in rural Victoria?

Jeroen WEIMAR: There is quite a lot happening in rural Victoria, and I appreciate the question and the chance to talk to it. We of course have got the Big Housing Build, which has now completed I think 1479 homes across regional Victoria. I will save you the list of the places we have been to. We have got the Regional Housing Fund that was initiated in 2023 – 1300 homes, all affordable – and the social homes again being built all across regional Victoria, and we have got the regional worker accommodation program, a \$150 million program of which 23 projects were announced recently, building homes across the west, the north and out towards the east. So we have strong efforts working in partnership with health authorities, local councils and other local providers to encourage the development of regional homes in those markets. What we are also starting to see is – again, talking to regional developers – there are certain pockets where the regional housing market is getting stronger. The final point I will make at this stage, Mrs McArthur, is that we issued back in June, July draft housing targets to all local government areas across Victoria, all predicated on building 2.2 million homes over the next 27 years to 2051. That was early work for release by the Minister for Planning as a part of the plan for Victoria. Those 2.2 million homes have now all been broken down into which numbers we would expect to see in each of the LGAs, and that of course includes regional LGAs.

Bev McARTHUR: Totally unrealistic proposals you put to many local government municipalities when they have no land.

Danny O'BRIEN: Just a clarification, if I could, Mr Weimar, you talked about the Big Housing Build, and you may have mentioned also those Commonwealth Games billion dollars for regional Victoria. What is the actual net increase though in public and social housing? There are figures for what is being built, but the reality is in places like my electorate we have actually gone backwards in actual number of social houses.

Jeroen WEIMAR: I do not have the exact numbers at hand, Mr O'Brien, but certainly –

Danny O'BRIEN: Are you happy to take it on notice?

Jeroen WEIMAR: I am happy to take it on notice, but certainly the indications we are seeing is around an additional 4000 net homes in the last few years that have been created.

Danny O'BRIEN: That is statewide?

Jeroen WEIMAR: Statewide social homes. Of course part of the work around the Big Housing Build is to ensure that we expand the number of quality social and public homes across Victoria. As I said, 9500 or so completed, another 2500 or so to go, the Regional Housing Fund has kicked in and a number of other programs are on their way.

Danny O'BRIEN: If you can provide that regional data on notice, on the net gain, that would be appreciated.

Jeroen WEIMAR: Happy to do so.

Bev McARTHUR: I will go to Mr Garwood now, please. Mr Garwood, what work has been done by the department on compulsory land acquisitions as part of the treaty process?

Terry GARWOOD: None.

Bev McARTHUR: None.

Terry GARWOOD: None.

Bev McARTHUR: What work has been done on the feasibility of returning acquired land to traditional owners?

Terry GARWOOD: None.

Bev McARTHUR: So we are moving down a path to treaty, but actually you have done no investigation into how land might be transferred to traditional owners?

Terry GARWOOD: Your question was about private land.

Bev McARTHUR: No, not necessarily. Crown land.

The CHAIR: Mrs McArthur, perhaps you could re-ask your question.

Bev McARTHUR: Well, have you done any work on compulsory acquisition of private land?

Terry GARWOOD: None.

Bev McARTHUR: None. What about the land at the Twelve Apostles, the Nesseler property that has been compulsorily acquired by the government?

Terry GARWOOD: I am not aware of that, I am sorry, Mrs McArthur.

Bev McARTHUR: Really?

Terry GARWOOD: Really.

Bev McARTHUR: Okay. So is any private land being considered for inclusion in reparations or treaty negotiations?

Terry GARWOOD: Not that I am aware of.

Bev McARTHUR: Is the department conducting or commissioning any modelling on properties that could be acquired?

Terry GARWOOD: No.

Bev McARTHUR: So what work has been done on transferring Crown land to traditional owners?

Terry GARWOOD: Well, the work associated with Crown land – there is already a process about Crown land, and that is called the *Traditional Owner Settlement Act 2010*, which I think you would have some familiarity with, Mrs McArthur. So under the *Traditional Owner Settlement Act*, which sits under and is connected to the *Native Title Act* of the Commonwealth, we enter into recognition and settlement agreements, which you would be familiar with some of them. And under those recognition and settlement agreements, from time to time there is transfer of particular sites of interest and significance. That is the basis under which the transfer of Crown land happens from time to time under recognition and settlement agreements under the *Traditional Owner Settlement Act*, and that is because under the *Traditional Owner Settlement Act* we have a connection to the *Native Title Act* of the Commonwealth, which recognises native title and traditional owners. There are four traditional owner groups that have gone through determination through the Federal Court and they have got native title recognition. As a consequence of that, to avoid ongoing litigation et cetera, the Commonwealth works with traditional owners through the *Traditional Owner Settlement Act*, under which we have an Indigenous land use agreement which connects our state legislation to the Commonwealth legislation. And under the *Traditional Owner Settlement Act* there are a number of agreements that are agreed between those traditional owners and the Victorian government, and under those agreements there has been occasion for transfer of ownership of particular Crown land sites.

Bev McARTHUR: So are you ruling out any compulsory acquisition of private land in this treaty process?

Terry GARWOOD: I am not in the position to comment on that. All I am saying is that you asked me if we had done any work in relation to that in terms of private land, and we have not. That is the answer.

Bev McARTHUR: Have traditional owners been consulted on potential land acquisition priorities?

Terry GARWOOD: Well, I mean, I think you are getting perhaps a little bit ahead of things here, Ms McArthur. I think you are alluding to the treaty process. Was that the starting point of your question?

Bev McARTHUR: Yes.

Terry GARWOOD: The government has gone through a very steady process in relation to developments in treaty over the last eight years. And you would be aware that the government, later this year, is looking to open treaty negotiations with the First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria in accordance with the treaty negotiation framework, which is a public document available on our website. If you care to have a look at it, you will see the details of how the negotiations are to be conducted, and treaty negotiations are going to commence later this year.

Bev McARTHUR: Last time I think I asked you about the lack of consultation with local municipalities over the cultural heritage management plans that emerged and then were imposed on local municipalities. You said those proposals were aspirational, yet many municipalities have had to actually enforce agreements that you have made.

Terry GARWOOD: No. Ms McArthur, I think you are mixing up two matters there. You are mixing up the local government agreements under the *Traditional Owner Settlement Act* with the cultural heritage management plans. They are two separate matters. Under the *Traditional Owner Settlement Act*, with those four registered Aboriginal parties who have rights under the *Native Title Act* and some recognition and settlement agreements under the *Traditional Owner Settlement Act* – we have asked for those, and those traditional owners want to engage with local government. As a consequence – in fact you will see in the annual report papers – we have resourced those four traditional owner groups to be able to engage with local government about their aspirations, if I remember our conversation last year.

I think the comment I also made about those aspirations is there is no obligation on local government in relation to those negotiations. It is an aspiration of the traditional owners to engage with local governments in their area. After all, traditional owners are citizens of those local councils, and they have every interest in wanting to engage with local government in a productive and cooperative manner. That said, there are no mandatory changes for local government as a consequence of entering into those discussions with local government. But I might say, the local councils have been quite interested and engaged and want to talk with local traditional owners and look for productive relationships. They understand cultural tourism, they understand empowerment of Aboriginal people, that these are benefits and opportunities that the whole community can benefit from. So when you talk about aspirations, yes, that is the aspiration of traditional owners, but I think it is also the aspiration of a lot of local councils.

Bev McARTHUR: How many lawyers have been utilised to prepare for treaty negotiations?

Terry GARWOOD: Well, I cannot provide you with that specific level of information. The treaty –

Bev McARTHUR: Would you be able to find it?

Terry GARWOOD: It is a strange question. Secretary, I might refer that to you.

Jeremi MOULE: If you are asking about DPC staff –

Bev McARTHUR: Yes, VPS lawyers but lawyers from external firms as well. Could you provide that detail?

Jeremi MOULE: I think in the questionnaire we list out our engagement of legal services, but we can provide those. The greatest reliance for legal advice in relation to preparation for treaty has been done through the VGSO. In relation to treaty matters, on behalf of the state, they have the eminent legal opinion, so in addition to any legal staff who might be employed by DPC in preparation for treaty, they are working in conjunction with the VGSO.

Bev McARTHUR: Anyway, if we could have the detail of that costing and outside law firms, and also the total cost of this legal advice.

Jeremi MOULE: Yes, and again that would be publicly reported, but we can provide it for you.

Bev McARTHUR: That is excellent. Thank you very much.

Nick McGOWAN: Do the VGSO charge you?

Jeremi MOULE: Yes, so there is a charging regime in relation to VGSO.

Bev McARTHUR: So it will be easily costable?

Jeremi MOULE: Yes, and also in various state budget decisions – this past budget and previous ones – there have been specific funding allocations for DPC in relation to treaty preparation, so again it is visible.

Bev McARTHUR: Could you give us information on the number of lawyers and the cost of the legal advice that has been required to prepare the evidence for the Yoorook Justice Commission?

Jeremi MOULE: Yes, and again aspects of that are reflected in the questionnaire.

Bev McARTHUR: Good. Thank you very much.

Terry GARWOOD: Perhaps, Ms McArthur, I could provide just a bit of background information on the Yoorook costings. It was established in May 2021 as the nation's first formal truth-telling inquiry. It is independent of government, as you know, and it is in effect a royal commission under the *Inquiries Act 2014*. The government originally provided \$44.4 million in the 2021–22 state budget for the establishment and operation of the commission, and then another \$7.7 million was provided in 2023–24 to supplement the commission's original funding. And then some additional funding was provided – another \$7.150 million over two years was announced in the 2024–25 budget – taking us to a total of about \$59.6 million.

Bev McARTHUR: So \$59.6 million for the cost of the Yoorook Justice Commission.

Jeremi MOULE: There is the cost of the commission to operate itself and then there are some costs related to DPC and government participation in that. I should say that for all commissions of inquiry, whether they be Yoorook, royal commissions or the like, the VMIA, through our insurance arrangements, cover the costs directly incurred by the department to participate in such inquiries.

Danny O'BRIEN: Do they cover the costs of ministers and the Premier as well?

Jeremi MOULE: Yes.

Danny O'BRIEN: Can you provide those costs on notice to us?

Jeremi MOULE: We can for the Premier and our portfolio ministers. We probably do not have details for other ministers. The VMIA would.

Bev McARTHUR: I refer to page 2 of the PAEC questionnaire and the pilot scheme to boost the Aboriginal cultural heritage system. Is there a report available that evaluates the outcomes of this pilot?

Terry GARWOOD: Sorry, Ms McArthur, just give us a second to have a look. What page number are you talking about?

Bev McARTHUR: Page 2 of the PAEC questionnaire – the pilot scheme to boost the Aboriginal cultural heritage system.

Danny O'BRIEN: The strategic Aboriginal heritage assessments pilot.

Terry GARWOOD: Yes, that is referenced in the annual report. We have done some work with I think three traditional owner corporations. It is work associated with looking to embed more information about Aboriginal cultural heritage sites into the Victorian planning system. It has been very, very positive and productive work. We are currently assessing that work as to where we would go with that. It seems to us to be very valuable and important and useful work because it enables developers et cetera to understand where sites of cultural significance might be in those three particular areas. We would be interested in looking to expand that system at some point, but that will be a matter for government.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

Bev McARTHUR: And you will give us that information?

The CHAIR: Mrs McArthur, your time is up. We will be swinging around to your side in just a moment. We are going to Ms Kathage.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you, Chair, Secretary and officials. It has been a really interesting discussion so far this morning, so thank you very much for all that you have shared with us. My community was impacted by the collapse of Porter Davis. I know there were many people who were, and Porter Davis I guess was not the only one. In response to this the government announced building reforms. What was DPC's role in terms of supporting the preparation and implementation of those reforms?

Jeremi MOULE: Thank you, Ms Kathage. I will ask Mr Loos to answer that question for you. Thank you.

Jason LOOS: Thank you for the question. Following the Porter Davis collapse, DPC chaired what we called the building reform interdepartmental committee, which provided high-level coordination across government and ensured alignment between agencies in all the work that we were doing. We were looking at the building regulator and how we could strengthen the building regulator and looking at the consumer side and how we could do more for consumers by way of insurance and protections and what needed to happen to the *Domestic Building Contracts Act* to make sure that both builders and consumers were best protected through that. So the role we played was effectively bringing different portfolio areas of government together and looking at the changes and enhancements that could be made to various parts, whether it was legislation or policies, to ensure that we have a much more coordinated approach.

But in terms of the collapse of Porter Davis, there were also the compensation schemes that the government introduced to assist those affected, and we played a role in working through what those compensation schemes were as well. That included the liquidated builders customer support payment scheme and again the updates to the *Domestic Building Contracts Act* as well to provide further strength to consumers. That work is progressing and we are at various stages. There is a lot of community consultation at the moment. Mr Weimar is doing a bit of it through the housing work that he is doing, because that is part of the housing statement as well. I do not know, maybe Mr Weimar could add to that.

Jeroen WEIMAR: Sure. Thank you. Thank you, Mr Loos. Just further to your question, Ms Kathage, as part of the building reform work that Mr Loos has described, there are a number of changes that I think we have really followed through on. One is bringing together the different regulators that all sit around the building industry. We are now working towards the set-up of a building and plumbing commission, which will really bring together the Victorian Building Authority, the Domestic Dispute Resolution Victoria function and the domestic building insurance function of the Victorian Managed Insurance Authority. We are bringing all the regulators together to give a single port of call, both for consumers but also for the building industry, so it is clear that the regulator has all the powers to address any defects and issues that are in place.

What we have also seen I think with the collapse of Porter Davis are some challenges around the managed insurance schemes, particularly with the use of the form of last resort insurance that we currently see in Victoria. We are now intending to move towards a first resort insurance scheme. Now we are working with industry on the design of how that scheme is going to operate. But that will ensure far greater protection for consumers coming in and looking at building their own home or buying a home off the plan.

Finally, we are also looking at particularly the mid-rise sector and the class 2 buildings. What we still see is that the majority of defects and problems with buildings happen in class 2 buildings, so apartment buildings and mid-rise buildings above three storeys. We are looking at a form of a developer bond arrangement that would ensure that developers who are building those buildings also have a dedicated fund set aside which the owners of the subsequent apartments and strata buildings can access for the first few years after completion. Typically, the defects occur in the first couple of years, and it is important to have some kind of provision of funds available to address them.

So there are a whole range of reforms, all of which are designed to essentially insure against Porter Davis and similar collapses, recognising that there were 251 domestic building firms that essentially went out of business over that period of 2020 to 2023, with thousands of people left in a very challenging space. Mr Loos has described the arrangements put in place to address them, but we want to ensure that the building industry is stronger and better regulated and offers a fairer deal for consumers going forward.

Lauren KATHAGE: Yes, absolutely, and I think everyone acknowledges that the vast majority of builders do the right thing and want the best thing by their consumers as well. It sounds like, in terms of the building reforms, DPC has played the classic coordinating role of DPC, but then having the benefit of having the housing statement being embedded means you are able to do a bit more value add around the technical details. Is that right?

Jason LOOS: Yes, because from a whole-of-government point of view, DTP were involved in monitoring the Victorian Building Authority. So you bring in then DTP and the minister there, and then you have got the consumer affairs side of it. You have got different parts of government, so that coordination role, especially when you are trying to solve a real problem, becomes really important to get all the different views and have the trade-offs and discussions in the room. And that is what DPC can facilitate, making sure then that we are giving the best advice to government.

Lauren KATHAGE: Yes, and I think it is reassuring as well for people in areas like mine that are building homes that this issue is right under the nose centrally in government. That is really great. Thank you.

We had DEECA here yesterday. They were talking about their work in terms of the renewable energy transition emissions reduction. In their presentation they spoke about the government's bringing forward of the net zero emissions target from 2050 to 2045, the legislation of offshore wind targets and these different things. Has DPC played a role? I mean, that is a very specific area of technology. Has DPC played a role in that as well?

Jason LOOS: Again, similar to the building regulation reforms, we play a coordinating role and chair the energy and climate action steering committee. That looks at a number of things in the DEECA portfolio, whether it be on the climate side or the resources side. Obviously government has very significant renewable energy targets that it is seeking to meet, and to meet those targets there is a range of different responses that are required. Again, it cuts across, whether it is planning- or transport-related issues. DPC coordinates a committee that looks after all these particular elements.

DEECA have done a number of discussion papers and made public a number of information papers to help the discussion. We also play the role of making sure that we have got the supporting infrastructure, whether it be the generation and the transmission, and making sure that that side of the equation is developing as needed but also being very aware of the impact it has on the consumer. How are we trying to track through and make sure that we are looking at it again from a whole-of-government basis, making sure all individuals affected are looked at? There are a number of programs that DEECA are investing in to ensure that the energy transition is affordable to all, and that is a quantum of work that has begun and will continue to go on for a long period of time given the journey of energy transition that we are on.

Lauren KATHAGE: Some of what they spoke about yesterday was around the Victorian energy upgrades program and the pretty amazing results against their targets for hot water rebates, solar in apartments and that sort of thing. You were talking about supporting infrastructure, and I think they put down some of their success in that regard and in maintaining customer satisfaction and processing times to Services Victoria or the app. Does Digital Victoria still sit under you?

Jeremi MOULE: Digital Victoria and Service Victoria are now part of the Department of Government Services.

Lauren KATHAGE: Right. I will hold fire until after the break then. But I think it originated with DPC. Success has many parents, and I think we can claim some success for the results there in the uptake of solar hot water, so well done. On industry and innovation more broadly, those portfolios for government – what is DPC's role? If Digital Victoria has moved out, what sort of touchpoints do you have with industry or innovation?

Jeremi MOULE: Particularly in support of the Premier, there are various activities and pieces of advice that we provide in that space, and we support her to undertake various engagements. Then it is a matter of us working in conjunction with DJSIR, which has primary carriage of most of the industry relationships, along with the Minister for Economic Growth, who is also the Treasurer. Mr Loos, did you want to add to that?

Jason LOOS: Yes. Thanks, Secretary. Essentially, under those jobs and industry and economic growth portfolios, we break them up into the three areas. You have got the industry side, which is the jobs and industry;

innovation, which is trying to support economic growth; and then investment, which is trying to support economic growth as well. We work, as the Secretary said, very closely with DJSIR to ensure that the advice we are providing to government is moving us forward, whether it is the industries we need to support due to issues that they are facing or the innovative growth opportunities in terms of looking at research and development and how we can actually encourage the right type of inward investment into our state. We are continually looking at ways to do things more effectively and efficiently and learning from – we talked about the international engagement. That is kind of like how you bring the developments that are happening in South-East Asia, for example. How do we coordinate and facilitate that in our own economy, and how do we match industry businesses to those in the other countries? We have various funding elements that we support in budgets. There are industry development funds; there are innovation funds. We play a role in assessing the applications that come through that, and we provide advice to the government on where the best bang for buck is, if you like, in terms of some of those initiatives.

Lauren KATHAGE: Is there coordination with DTF on that?

Jason LOOS: Yes. It is essentially DTF through the Treasurer and Minister of Economic Growth and then DJSIR as well with the economic growth minister. Again, that is quite a whole-of-government-type initiative, so we play a very close role with both DJSIR and DTF on that.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you. We have spoken about a few different committees that exist in terms of coordinating within government. I think sometimes also expertise is brought in from outside government in the form of boards et cetera, and I think in the 2023–24 year we had an updated appointment and remuneration guidelines secretariat released. That was in the 2023–24 financial year. Those updated guidelines for the appointment and remuneration of people – how are they supporting good governance or making sure that we get the best advice or making sure that people are fairly rewarded for supporting the government in that way?

Jeremi MOULE: Thank you. There are quite a large number of boards and committees that support the work of government. Some of them are advisory in nature, in that they bring their industry or technical expertise to a department or a minister with their advice. Others have more operational roles. Some of our cultural institutions, for example, have boards that oversee them. Ensuring that there is the right balance between appropriate remuneration and recognition for the time that people give up in order to participate and also the expertise that they bring to the table as well as having integrity in the selection process for those are both important. I might ask Mr Puls just to make some further remarks on those matters.

Joshua PULS: Sure. Thank you, Ms Kathage. The guidelines are issued by the Premier to support good governance and ensure fair, transparent, open and competitive recruitment practices to try to create as many opportunities as possible for Victorians right across the state to serve on government boards and to try to have as much diversity as possible on those boards as well. DPC updated the guidelines in October 2023 to try to further those objectives. Key changes included a 10-year limit on the period a person can serve on a board to ensure that there is regular refreshing of the membership and diversity of views. The guidelines now have a requirement to advertise all vacancies on the government's Join a Public Board website, so that again creates pathways for any Victorian to indicate an interest in joining a government board and to be considered for that, and new limitations on the appointment of lobbyists to public boards were also introduced in the guidelines. There were also others – more sort of housekeeping, clarifying existing requirements and just making the guidelines more accessible. They all aim to ensure we have as broad a representation as possible on Victorian public sector boards and that they operate in the best possible way.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you. I think in the 2023–24 year we were very proud, all of us, to reach a Parliament that was 50 per cent women. That fantastic diversity in this place is so important, and I know the government in particular credits some of our most important policies down to having women at the table sharing experiences of women and also their expertise around free kinder, free pads and tampons and women's health work. You mentioned diversity on boards and a greater focus on that in the updated guidelines. Can you go explain what has been put in place to improve diversity on boards to make sure we are getting that best, broadest advice?

Joshua PULS: Certainly there has been a strong desire to see greater representation not only of women on public boards – and the government has made great progress on that – but also people with disabilities, people from regional Victoria, LGBTQIA+ communities, multicultural communities. There has been a desire to make

those opportunities available and known to those communities right across the board so that we can ensure not only a gender balance but a broader balance that truly represents the Victorian community.

Jeremi MOULE: I think that is the important point in relation to whether it is boards or even employment in our own organisations; having entities that are reflective of the make-up of the Victorian community is important. So when we use the term ‘diversity’, that is what we mean in that context. And I think that does support better decision-making. It brings the broadest and most representative group of people together with their views and experiences to support the advice that we might provide or decisions that ministers might make.

Joshua PULS: Yes. It is not rocket science that the representation on Victorian public sector boards should reflect the Victorian community.

Lauren KATHAGE: You mentioned a website. Is that a new thing, that website?

Joshua PULS: No. I think it used to be called ‘Get on Board’; now it is called the ‘Join a Public Board’ website. That is where people can register their interest in joining boards, and then they get notifications when vacancies are made available.

Lauren KATHAGE: In running through the list of the broad scope that we want to see on boards in terms of reflecting the community, I am not sure that you mentioned youth. Is that –

Joshua PULS: Sorry. Yes, definitely – absolutely. Thank you – absolutely. I do not have the stats in front of me, but I believe there has been some progress on that in terms of actually having some younger people on boards than perhaps might have been the case historically.

Nick McGOWAN: How many?

Joshua PULS: As I say, I do not have the stats in front of me, but I understand that to be the case.

Lauren KATHAGE: Do you want to see more young people on boards?

Nick McGOWAN: Sure. I am happy to. I just doubt there are any between 18 and 25.

Lauren KATHAGE: I think when you were younger you would have been a prime candidate for some of those boards. I can see you –

Nick McGOWAN: It was not that long ago when I was younger. Chair, that is an attack!

Lauren KATHAGE: No, no – that is very good. I think you have taken us through some of the different internal committees as well as the work that has been done on updating guidelines for the external boards. In terms of connections between those two, how do the external boards inform the work of interdepartmental committees or the advice that DPC is providing to government? What is the channel and how does that advice flow?

Jeremi MOULE: Across government there is quite a mix of the nature of different types of boards or indeed advisory committees, and it is probably the latter that have more interface with the public service, whether they are specifically attached to a portfolio or there is an area of specific expertise that might be brought. I think there was a mention earlier today of horse tracking, so that is an example. We have got goat identification tagging systems and so on where there are specific advisory boards that bring a degree of technical knowledge that you would not regularly expect to exist in any depth within the public service. They are really important in forming policy advice. Other advisory boards have more of a direct relationship into a minister’s office or accountabilities that face directly towards a minister. Similarly, the advice that ministers would receive from those types of advisory committees and boards, again, helps to shape policy decisions or project decisions that might be made by the government. Again, bringing to bear a diversity of view – and diversity beyond that which we bring as a public service – I think supports the government of the day to balance the needs of the communities and make the best possible decisions.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Secretary. Thank you, Ms Kathage. The committee is going to take a short break before resuming its consideration of Premier and Cabinet at 11:15 am. I declare this hearing adjourned.

The committee will now resume its consideration of the Department of Premier and Cabinet. We are going to go straight to Mr O'Brien.

Danny O'BRIEN: Good morning, everybody. Mr Weimar, can I ask what is the total cost to the budget of all the policies in the September 2023 housing statement?

Jeroen WEIMAR: Mr O'Brien, thank you. I do not have a cost estimate. As you will appreciate, I think as the Secretary introduced in his opening comments, this program runs across seven departments and 10 different agencies. The real focus of much of our work has been around the land and planning system, so I do not have a dedicated set-aside budget for that work program.

Danny O'BRIEN: You do not have it, or it has just not been done as a total?

Jeroen WEIMAR: It has not been done as a total. I mean, DPC's role in this space is to coordinate the work across all of government. We are working with colleagues in all these other departments. Much of that work is around, as I said, the land system, the planning system, and how we enable housing to be developed. I am sure you will be talking to Homes Victoria and our colleagues in DFFH later on. Again, there are some big-spending programs in those areas but there is no one consolidated budget for this program.

Danny O'BRIEN: Okay. You mentioned before property prices moderating in Melbourne. Do you expect or is it the government's forecast that prices will continue to fall over the next 10 years of the government's program?

Jeroen WEIMAR: I think we are working closely with a number of property firms and advisers and economists in this space. Our expectation of the overall housing market is that it will continue to see underlying demand, which is now starting to build. We can see, due to people who are looking for homes, that that pressure is starting to build. We think with the amount of stock that is sitting in the system at the moment, including planning approvals that are already in the system that have not yet commenced construction, that we will see demand and volume steadily start to rise, because a lot of this is predicated on expectations around base rate interest rates, very much a national picture. We would expect therefore demand to continue to be building up progressively. We would hope that with all the reforms we are making around the planning system and the land use system that we would moderate, by enabling more supply, any upward pressure on prices.

Danny O'BRIEN: When you say 'We would hope', in conjunction or parallel with the housing statement, has the department done any modelling or analysis of how it will impact on prices?

Jeremi MOULE: I might answer this question because Jeroen was not working on this subject matter when the housing statement was done. Certainly DTF undertook modelling and provided some advice to government at the time of the housing statement's development about likely impact, but it is two things. It is a supply and demand game that obviously goes a long way to dictating price movements and then at a national level base interest rate levels.

Danny O'BRIEN: Was that modelling done internally or by a consultant?

Jeremi MOULE: It is probably a question for DTF. I do not know the answer to that.

Danny O'BRIEN: I thought you said DPC did it.

Jeremi MOULE: Sorry, DTF did some economic modelling in support of the preparation of the statement.

Danny O'BRIEN: Okay. Righto. We might have to ask them for a copy of it. Moving back to higher density apartments, Maxwell Shifman, the CEO of Intrapac, has stated:

... apartment projects remain highly risky and non-feasible across large parts of the country.

If apartments are highly risky and non-feasible, why are they the centrepiece of the housing strategy?

Jeroen WEIMAR: Well, Mr O'Brien, I think there are two things I would say, one of which is that we are seeing some recovery in the apartment market, particularly in the build-to-rent sector. Melbourne has around 70 per cent of all the build-to-rent supply of apartments. It is all happening within Melbourne at a national level, so I think we have a strong sector there. We have significant interest from institutional investors, and we have seen that with the request for proposals at the Arden site, where we are looking at a major opportunity for significant residential development at quite some high levels of density. There is interest in the apartments market. You are absolutely right in saying, or Max Shifman is correct in saying, that it is challenging from a construction cost at the moment. We have seen construction costs nationally go up for both detached home building and for apartment building, and the cost of building apartments has gone up about 25 per cent over the last four or five years. Actually, Victoria's performance in that is slightly better than the rest of the states, but it remains a significant cost challenge.

Jeroen WEIMAR: What our reforms are based on with regard to medium-density apartments and high-density apartments is ensuring the planning system is not in the way, because we know that –

Danny O'BRIEN: Are you getting feedback, though, from builders that are saying exactly what Mr Shifman said, that it is just too expensive at the moment?

Jeroen WEIMAR: The feedback we are getting from developers and builders at the moment is that at a certain price point apartments are progressing and they are able to get the off-the-plan sales. We are getting feedback that the off-the-plan stamp duty concession is a significant shot in the arm to encouraging people to buy off the plan. In order to get an apartment building up, you need off-the-plan sales in order to commit the sheer scale of funds. The third thing they are saying is that particularly under the current relatively high interest rate environment, there are high holding costs for developers and for builders to hold on to property; particularly if the planning system is uncertain or unpredictable, it takes a long period of time.

Danny O'BRIEN: And hence the off-the-plan as well.

Jeroen WEIMAR: Hence off-the-plan concessions are important. But also simplifying and making the planning system swifter and more certain is so important, which is why all those planning reforms are so important to what we are trying to do.

Jeremi MOULE: Mr O'Brien, I would not characterise that as the centrepiece. I would take you to Mr Weimar's earlier answer to Mrs McArthur. We are actually trying to activate the entirety of the system, whether they are greenfields or high-rise or whatever the case might be, in order to drive the delivery of more homes for Victorians.

Danny O'BRIEN: Perhaps not, Secretary, but when the Premier and minister went to Brighton to announce the first phase of this, that was the centrepiece. That was high-rise –

Jeremi MOULE: That was certainly the announcement of that day.

Danny O'BRIEN: Yes. Starting that week. Foreign buyers will also receive the off-the-plan concession. How does that help millennials get into homes?

Jeroen WEIMAR: The purpose of the off-the-plan concession was to encourage off-the-plan development. We are trying to increase the supply of housing units, dwelling units within Victoria, and we saw that as the most significant and targeted thing we could do at this time whilst the industry as a whole is waiting for base-rate interest rates to start to drop. We are certainly getting feedback from developers and from the institutional investors that it is encouraging a lot more interest in off-the-plan sales, and we have seen from some of the major online sales platforms that inquiries have increased significantly since the announcements were made. Ultimately whether these apartments have been bought by investors or by homeowners, they increase the supply of housing. It allows those projects to get off the ground, and that was the most important part of that particular element of the package.

Danny O'BRIEN: So the foreign buyers are a part of that?

Jeroen WEIMAR: Foreign buyers are absolutely a part of that. If ultimately we are getting investment into the sector, institutional investors are part of that as well.

Danny O'BRIEN: The Treasurer has indicated that the off-the-plan stamp duty concession – being brought in, I might add, having been scrapped by the government in 2017 – will cost about \$55 million. How much is estimated that foreign buyers will recoup of that?

Jeroen WEIMAR: I do not have an estimate for that. I think Treasury would probably be the place to go to for that advice.

Danny O'BRIEN: Can I move to the Commonwealth Games, and I do not know whether we can ask Mr Weimar questions on this. He was probably, for the period in question, in the chair.

Jeremi MOULE: I think that I might take questions on the Commonwealth Games, Mr O'Brien.

Danny O'BRIEN: I will let you answer how you see. In respect of the \$380 million paid for failing to host the games, what further liabilities and obligations does Victoria have?

Jeremi MOULE: There are no further obligations or liabilities.

Danny O'BRIEN: Are there any outstanding legal matters or other contractual matters?

Jeremi MOULE: No, there are not.

Danny O'BRIEN: None at all?

Jeremi MOULE: None at all.

Danny O'BRIEN: Okay. Did DPC lead the negotiations for getting out of the contract?

Jeremi MOULE: Yes, I did personally.

Danny O'BRIEN: You did personally. What actions did you take to ensure that we minimised the spend for Victoria for getting nothing?

Jeremi MOULE: I think, Mr O'Brien, I would take you to the Auditor-General's work in this space. I think he had access to all government documents, including cabinet materials. He had access to the confidential settlement deed that was signed between Commonwealth Games parties and the state of Victoria. He made the observation that, had the state not reached a settlement by agreement, there was the potential that litigation to resolve the matter could be brought in multiple jurisdictions, last multiple years and result in substantial additional costs, and also made the remark that DPC achieved a quick settlement that resolved the state's liabilities from deciding to withdraw. I think that if the Auditor-General had had a view that, although that sum of money is a large amount of money, the decisions made were not in the best interests of the state, he would clearly have said so, as he called out in other aspects of his report.

Danny O'BRIEN: Okay. Thank you. Has the Premier been invited to the Glasgow games as yet?

Jeremi MOULE: I do not know. Premiers would not routinely be invited to Commonwealth Games anywhere, Mr O'Brien.

Danny O'BRIEN: Well, I would be interested to see if she gets an invitation.

Bev McARTHUR: Since we are funding it.

Danny O'BRIEN: Yes, since we are paying for it. Can I go back to SRL –

Bev McARTHUR: We all get an invite.

The CHAIR: Mrs McArthur.

Nick McGOWAN: And a flight and a ticket.

Danny O'BRIEN: We should get free tickets.

Bev McARTHUR: Every taxpayer in Victoria should get a ticket.

The CHAIR: Order! Mr O'Brien, your next question.

Danny O'BRIEN: Sorry, Chair. We are out of order over here. Can I go back to the SRL. We were talking before, Secretary, about contracts. Did the Premier review contracts herself? You said that DPC definitely looked at them.

Jeremi MOULE: The contracts come to the relevant cabinet committees for consideration. The Premier is part of those committees and reviews those, and we provide our advice in support of the decision-making of the committee.

Danny O'BRIEN: This is just a personal reflection: what does the contract for a \$1.7 billion tunnelling contract look like? Is it 50 pages? Is it 300 pages? Is it 4000 pages?

Jason LOOS: It is big –

Danny O'BRIEN: Define 'big', Mr Loos.

Jason LOOS: with a number of attachments.

Danny O'BRIEN: Okay. Give me an idea.

Jason LOOS: Well, it goes into the thousands –

Danny O'BRIEN: Thousands of pages.

Jason LOOS: with all the attachments. You have got to think about it in terms of when we actually go out to market and when the bids come in. The designs and the construction methodology are all listed in a contractual form.

Danny O'BRIEN: So in all that, going to questions we asked before – I am not asking specifics, because I know you will not be able to tell me specifics about the contracts – is it standard practice that there are exit clauses of some description in a big contract like this?

Jeremi MOULE: There are usually dispute resolution clauses that have escalation mechanisms and also implications if either party does not fulfil their obligations. I think generically –

Jason LOOS: We have a number of different contract forms as well, which Treasury has done a lot of work on over the last five years to try and standardise. I know they have done a lot of work with other jurisdictions to try and have commercial principles in contract clauses that actually line up. So if you are doing a project in Victoria and it is a particular brand, an alliance or an early contractor involvement, a private–public partnership, you have got a set of commercial principles and contract clauses that we try and keep common across all aspects, whether it is a health project or a justice project or a transport project. There are obviously going to be changes. Some of the big PPP contracts have default termination clauses which have very clear calculations based on what would happen in particular termination events, whether it be a force majeure event or a default termination event.

Danny O'BRIEN: Okay. So within certain boundaries the state can get out of the contract?

Jason LOOS: I think at a very high level there are always opportunities, but again, certain contracts are a lot more specific in terms of if a particular event arises, it takes you to a particular clause. Others are less so, as the Secretary described – alternative dispute resolution types.

Danny O'BRIEN: Okay. Is there a register of risks associated with the SRL East project?

Jeremi MOULE: The register would be held by the SRLA as the delivery agency for the project. Is that what you are –

Danny O'BRIEN: I am asking if there is one.

Jason LOOS: Yes, there are, which all ultimately go to the relevant cabinet committee in terms of whether it is monthly updates that have a risk register associated with them, and there is a committee that I am on that looks at that and assesses it.

Danny O'BRIEN: My next question is always of course: can I have a copy of it? That is going to be a question for SRLA. Or does DPC –

Jason LOOS: To SRLA. But ultimately we give the relevant subcommittee regular updates, so it actually is a cabinet document.

Danny O'BRIEN: Okay. So can the committee have a copy of it?

Jeremi MOULE: Even if that was ours, which in this instance it is not – it is a question for the SRLA – we would not release cabinet documents.

Danny O'BRIEN: What is the largest risk associated with the project?

Jeremi MOULE: There are no specific or peculiar risks associated with the SRL that are not present in most other very large infrastructure projects at the moment, some of which we have traversed.

Danny O'BRIEN: What is the biggest one? If the risk register presumably is in order of concern or quantum or whatever, what is the biggest concern?

Jeremi MOULE: Given that the risk register is a cabinet document, I cannot go to those specifically, Mr O'Brien, other than to say, as I did just say, there are risks associated with very large infrastructure projects. This is one of those, and we have traversed some of that ground today.

Danny O'BRIEN: And we have seen some of those in this committee before. Are there any red-flagged risks identified in that document?

Jason LOOS: I mean, at any particular time, you know, the risks are always being updated.

Danny O'BRIEN: Okay. We have touched before on your email, Mr Loos, to ministerial offices about the FFS strategy.

Jason LOOS: What was the date of that email, Mr O'Brien, can I ask?

Danny O'BRIEN: 10 October last year, I think it was.

Jason LOOS: Last year?

Danny O'BRIEN: Yes, 2023, so in the period.

Jason LOOS: I do get a lot of emails; I am not going to remember that one, Mr O'Brien.

Danny O'BRIEN: I am surprised you cannot remember it off the top of your head, but it talks about a comparison of SRL changes. What were the changes to the SRL funding strategy?

Jason LOOS: I cannot recall the specifics, but you can imagine for a funding and financing strategy for a project like this that is looking at funding a third of a \$30 billion to \$34 billion project, there will be a certain amount of enhancements and tweaks throughout the evaluation and the analysis.

Danny O'BRIEN: I might cut to the chase again: can we get a copy of that document?

Jason LOOS: That is cabinet in confidence.

Jeremi MOULE: Yes, that material would also be cabinet in confidence, Mr O'Brien, because it was iterative policy development heading towards government ultimately making a final decision about what the funding and financing strategy would be, which it will need to announce and make public in due course.

Danny O'BRIEN: Okay. How much has been spent so far on acquiring homes and businesses along the route?

Jeremi MOULE: I think that is a question for the SRLA.

Danny O'BRIEN: Okay. I might move back to some other issues, Secretary. You talked in your presentation about the Timber Creek decision with respect to traditional owner issues and native title. Maybe it is a question for Mr Garwood: how many proposed Crown land sales have been paused while compensation to traditional owners in line with the Timber Creek precedent is settled?

Terry GARWOOD: So perhaps just going back to the starting point of that Timber Creek decision, the Secretary referred to the first principles review that was established by the government in partnership with traditional owners. One of the key issues of that first principles review was to come to grips with the High Court's decision in relation to *Northern Territory v Griffiths* –

Danny O'BRIEN: Otherwise known as Timber Creek.

Terry GARWOOD: Otherwise known as Timber Creek, correct – which established for the first time clear guidance from the High Court in relation to community benefits compensation for particular acts.

Danny O'BRIEN: Just so the committee's clear on this: if Crown land is sold – this is the application I am asking about anyway – but it has native title attached to it, there needs to be a compensation arrangement to the native title holders and that set a precedent. Correct?

Terry GARWOOD: Well, I mean, we have already been making compensation payments of one form or another, but we did not have the guidance of the High Court as to what that should be.

Danny O'BRIEN: Which was 50 per cent for economic loss, and then some cultural and some interest.

Terry GARWOOD: Correct. In the order of those figures, yes. So the Timber Creek decision for the first time gives us High Court guidance. The government obviously is keen to make sure that we comply with that kind of judicial decision and established what is called an interim community benefits formula, which broadly complies with the key elements of the Timber Creek decision. There is some more work to be done on some of the elements, and that is work that is going on now. But it enables us, using the interim community benefit formula, to go back to those traditional owners that have recognition and settlement agreements and rather than have them litigate the issue, for us to say, 'Well, we've got an interim community benefits formula to seek to make payments.' Now, just getting to your specific question, I am not aware of any holding up of any sales of Crown land because of that Timber Creek decision. That is not a material matter for us. But we are seeking to deal with the Timber Creek decision.

Danny O'BRIEN: I can give you an example. In my own electorate, Sale police station – the former Sale police station – has been sitting there vacant and nothing has happened for literally nine years now. I understand it is because it is between First Peoples, state relations and the Gunnai/Kurnai or GLAWAC, and I understand it is about haggling over the price. Out of Timber Creek, is there a figure of 50 per cent, 80 per cent, that government is negotiating over?

Terry GARWOOD: We are using the Timber Creek decision to help us guide the negotiations. That is a relatively recent decision by the government. That has enabled us to be more active in trying to reach a resolution, including in relation to, I think it is, the former Sale police station. We are in very active negotiations. The Gunnai/Kurnai traditional owners are a very good First Nations traditional owners group.

Danny O'BRIEN: Fantastic, yes.

Terry GARWOOD: They do fantastic work on the ground – really exemplary. They would like to get a settlement – like to move on the matter.

Danny O'BRIEN: They would.

Terry GARWOOD: We would as well, so we have now inserted this into the conversation. We are trying to negotiate our way through it.

Danny O'BRIEN: You touched on the interim community benefits formula. How is that formed and agreed? What was the process for that?

Terry GARWOOD: Well, we just used the material provided from the Timber Creek decision, knowing that were some matters that were a little bit more complex – things to do with solatium, as in, impact of cultural loss. That is a very complex matter. We have sort of put that aside and parked that for discussions with the First Peoples' Assembly, but the actual guidance that was given enables us to make, as we call it, an 'interim community benefit formula', which we are using. We are now actively negotiating with those traditional owner corporations in relation to what that means for them, and that is a very positive outcome. It gives certainty and enables us to move through on matters that have been sort of held up because of that. So we are actively negotiating.

Danny O'BRIEN: I am going to run out of time, Mr Garwood. Would you be able to provide on notice a bit more of an explanation of how that interim formula was established?

Terry GARWOOD: Yes, very happy to.

Danny O'BRIEN: That would be great. Very quickly, the questionnaire refers to two additional traditional owner corporations commencing negotiations. Who are they? Again, maybe you could take that on notice as well.

Terry GARWOOD: Yes, I can. I will take it on notice.

Danny O'BRIEN: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Garwood. You are very generous. Your time is up, Mr O'Brien.

Danny O'BRIEN: Much more generous than the Chair, Mr Garwood, who is ruthless.

The CHAIR: We are going to go straight to Mr Tak.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you, Chair, Secretary and officials. Parliamentary workplace standards and integrity on page 37 of the annual report talks about the *Parliamentary Workplace Standards and Integrity Act 2024*. Can you please tell the committee about DPC's role in the development and implementation of that Act?

Jeremi MOULE: Thank you, Mr Tak, for your question. I will ask Mr Puls to answer it substantively, but because the Premier was essentially the lead minister for that legislation, the bulk of the work in preparation of the Bill and the engagement that took place either happened by DPC or in some cases by the Premier's office, with members of Parliament. But I will ask Mr Puls to answer in more detail.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you.

Joshua PULS: Thank you, Mr Tak. Yes, as the department serving the Premier as the responsible minister for this Act, we undertook all the usual work you might expect in developing and drafting the Bill. That obviously included researching policy options, looking at other jurisdictions, looking at recommendations from relevant parliamentary reports and so on and working with the Office of the Chief Parliamentary Counsel on the drafting instructions. There were also house amendments as the Bill was going through Parliament, which we supported, and preparing materials to support the Premier and the government as the Bill passed through Parliament.

The department was also involved in extensive engagement with stakeholders, including members of Parliament – I think I might have come to a briefing in this very room – parliamentary committees, integrity bodies and other experts, and public officers across law, workplace standards, human rights, equal opportunity and gender equality – so a very broad consultation process in the preparation of the model and the drafting of the Bill. It has now passed Parliament, and there is a commencement date of 31 December 2024. Now the department is supporting the Premier in the recruitment and appointment of the inaugural commissioners, and the Act requires that those commissioners must have the unanimous endorsement of the Integrity and Oversight Committee of Parliament. We also have recruited an initial establishment team to ensure that the commission can get started straightaway. We are looking for accommodation for the commission and all the normal sort of

work you would expect to ensure that once that becomes operational on 31 December the commission is able to get to work.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you. Also, Secretary, in your presentation you referred to implementation of the updated ministerial code of conduct. Can you tell us how this will strengthen the conduct, integrity and probity for ministers and parliamentary secretaries?

Jeremi MOULE: Great, thank you. I will ask Mr Puls to continue.

Joshua PULS: Sure. Thank you, Mr Tak. The code clarifies ministerial obligations, including prescribing minimum standards of ethical behaviour. It prescribes internal governance practices to help ensure that breaches are avoided. It introduces reporting obligations under the code to improve transparency of ministerial interests by requiring the disclosure of interests; the declaration and management of conflicts of interest for publication on the ministerial register; gifts, benefits and hospitalities above a threshold amount that are accepted for publication on a register; and quarterly diary summaries containing details of scheduled meetings with stakeholders, external organisations and lobbyists. All of this means that there is greater transparency and increased public scrutiny of ministerial actions and government decision-making. It helps ensure that ministers and parliamentary secretaries can acquit their ethical obligations. All of this is designed to support better, more transparent decision-making by ministers and ministerial offices and is all part of promoting a culture of integrity, hopefully leading to better outcomes for Victorians.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you. Secretary, through you, perhaps to Mr Weimar, page 22 of the annual report talks about delivering on the government's housing statement. Can you tell the committee about the role that DPC played in the previous financial year to deliver the government's housing statement?

Jeroen WEIMAR: Thank you, Mr Tak. As we have discussed I think during the morning, the role of DPC is to coordinate the work of around seven different departments and 10 agencies in delivering the housing statement, and it runs all the way across 'How do we accurately enable more land to come forward for development?' Probably the signature piece of that work is our forward 10-year greenfield plan to enable more land to be brought forward and to give greenfield communities and growth-area communities a chance to see the likely development of housing over the medium term and the planning system reforms that we are working on, particularly with the work around our 10 activity centres as a pilot program and then the announcement of a further 25 activity centres in other parts of the state. We are looking at releasing individual blocks of government land held across a number of different government agencies to encourage development to come forward. Probably the most significant one would be the Arden site, which has gone to RFP. We have another four smaller blocks of land that are at the RFP stage at the moment and two further pieces of old railway land that have been removed from their railway restrictions and are now being put forward for housing development.

We are working closely with our planning colleagues around the development facilitation program which enables developers to have a fast-tracked route to getting significant housing developments reviewed and, if appropriate, approved by the planning minister. Nineteen housing projects have been approved in the last 12 months. That is about another 5000 homes that have been enabled through that process. Again, it is all about speeding up the planning system to move on that.

I touched earlier on the Big Housing Build being delivered largely through DFFH and Homes Victoria – around 12,000 homes there. The Regional Housing Fund, which Mr O'Brien recognised was part of the former Commonwealth Games sites, is putting about 1300 new homes into all different parts of regional Victoria. We have released \$400 million of growth area infrastructure funding to enable that growth, infrastructure around those new suburban communities to the north, south and west of Melbourne. We are also looking at significant changes to more localised planning levers, the codification of our residential code, enabling the building of small second homes on people's lots. The Premier has announced an intention to enable easier subdivision of people's home lots, again, all to make it easier to bring housing forward.

The short-stay levy has passed Parliament. That provides for a 7.5 per cent levy on short-term holiday lets. That will be implemented from January of next year. And of course there is a significant package of work around rental stress, a number of rental reforms that have been implemented by the Minister for Consumer Affairs – a rental stress package of around \$7.8 million to help people who are in need to access support services across the state and then a whole series of related reforms around the rental space, particularly looking at a dispute

resolution process to deal with those smaller, challenging disputes that tenants can often have with their landlords. So there are a range of programs.

As I said, Mr Tak, I think the role of DPC in all of this is to coordinate and bring those pieces together to make sure that we have policy coordination across government and to work very closely with industry. We held a significant housing forum back in August of this year with around 150 developers, builders, constructors and stakeholders there, and we continue to work very closely with the industry to navigate through a very challenging time. As I said, there are indications that we are seeing some signs that things are starting to move in the right direction, but there is a very long way to go. Thank you.

Meng Heang TAK: In the presentation you also talked about the activity centres. Can you also tell us what progress and investment there is in the new activity centres?

Jeroen WEIMAR: Yes. Thank you. The original housing statement in September of last year talked about 10 pilot activity centres. We have gone through, I think, two rounds of public consultation in each of those centres. They are at Broadmeadows, Camberwell Junction, Chadstone, Epping, Frankston, Moorabbin, Niddrie, North Essendon, Preston and Ringwood. We envisage, particularly within those activity centres, which are all clustered around rail stations, apart from Chadstone, essentially lifting planning controls to enable the development of buildings typically between four and 12 storeys – that is in the target zone within the core of that activity centre – and then much lower heights in the surrounding, walkable catchment area. The purpose of driving activity centres forward is to give more planning confidence to landowners and potential developers to make it easier to get those projects off the ground, to also create a faster and simpler planning pathway and to remove some of those third-party appeals within that core retail area to simplify those buildings going up, again, as I say, typically in that four- to 12-storey range. The only two that have a slightly higher height at the moment are Ringwood, at up to 20 storeys, and Frankston, up to 16, recognising the higher density that is already there.

I would add that I think if we look around Melbourne at the moment, we are already seeing that kind of development emerging quite naturally without the activities of the gazettals. There are 14-storey buildings in Brunswick, 17-storey buildings in Malvern and 14-storey buildings in Doncaster, but typically they have had to work their way through a very long and slow and complex planning system with extensive VCAT appeals and other challenges, all of which make it very hard and very uneconomical to build those buildings. The activity centre reform is about simplifying that.

We would expect the planning minister to be in a position to gazette the 10 activity centres at the end of this year. We have identified and named 25 further activity centres – I will not read them all out unless you want me to – and there are a further 25 coming behind that. So we would expect in the next two years or so to have 60 activity centres gazetted across Melbourne, again, giving clarity and simplicity in the planning system, giving confidence to development and recognising, as we have discussed earlier, that there are headwinds in building high-density apartment buildings. This gives the constructors, the builders and the landowners a chance to get those buildings off the ground.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you. And can you tell us a little bit more in terms of what the speeding up of the housing system will look like in a practical sense?

Jeroen WEIMAR: The levers that we have been pulling on in terms of our housing system – one I have mentioned is the greenfield program. Again, this is a program about how we push all parts of our residential house-building sector ahead. The greenfield program I have talked about is the first time that any government has published a 10-year forward program of where we will undertake precinct structure plans. Twenty-seven precinct structure plans have been identified and phased. Again, that gives confidence and clarity to industry about where we intend to simplify those planning controls.

What we are also looking at particularly in those greenfield areas is working with referral authorities, which has been a challenge, particularly if you look at the complexities of water drainage and water supply and infrastructure provision. So we are coordinating and strengthening the role of particularly our transport and planning colleagues in working with referral authorities to make sure that they are lined up and able to enable development.

I have talked extensively about the activity centres. I will leave that over. But we are also now looking at the fundamental planning system – so the introduction of making it easier to build a second home. That was introduced over a year ago, and again, it has enabled people to build that small second property on their existing block if it is large enough. We are now also looking at provisions early next year about how we can subdivide properties more simply, something that was there 25, 30 years ago. We want to go back to a system where people can subdivide their blocks easily, again because it enables particularly that townhouse market to come forward more easily. It gives people certainty and clarity about the applications they are putting forward. We are also starting to work, again with the planning minister and the Department of Transport and Planning, on potential options around that *Planning and Environment Act*. That Act has not been significantly reviewed for about 30 years. There are some opportunities to really see simpler reforms around planning systems and simplifying the way forward on that program.

Finally, I will go back to an earlier comment. As part of the plan for Victoria consultation that the planning minister has undertaken, what we have also trialled is really looking at a longer term housing target. The housing statement was envisaged as 800,000 homes over the first 10 years. As I said, we have made a solid start but a lot more work to do over the next nine or so years, but we have also looked at the longer term projections with 2.2 million homes needing to be built in Victoria over the next 25 or so years to 2051 – 27 years, and those targets are now also being extensively discussed with local councils. There needs to be a partnership with local councils to ensure that with the local planning changes we identify the opportunities to build that kind of housing, but it also enables a really good conversation with every single council area – all 79 LGAs, whether in metro Melbourne, regional Victoria or in the growth suburbs – around how those longer term housing needs can be met to make sure we have got places for our children and grandchildren to live over the decades ahead.

Meng Heang TAK: I am interested in the regional housing build. Can you tell us a little bit more on that in terms of what progress has happened?

Jeroen WEIMAR: Regional housing has been a big focus of our work. Typically if you look at the existing number of homes in Victoria, regional Victoria accounts for around a quarter of all the homes in Victoria at the moment. Our Big Housing Build, which is that big social and affordable housing build program, has now completed 1479 homes in regional Victoria. The Regional Housing Fund that I mentioned earlier will enable and bring forward over 1300 social and affordable homes only in regional Victoria, and those include homes in the Mallee, in Wimmera, in Loddon, in Barwon, Ovens–Murray and in Gippsland. So we have a significant number of homes underway across all parts of regional Victoria, and as of a few weeks ago, 180 of those homes have already been completed, and that work of course continues on.

We also have a regional worker accommodation program which is now operating. Twenty-three projects were funded recently, and we have another funding round open. This is all around enabling particularly seasonal worker accommodation; we know that is a real challenge in many of our regional communities. So we have seen projects, particularly working in partnership with health authorities, in places like Shepparton and in Wangaratta; with the seasonal tourism industry in Mount Hotham and Mount Buller and Falls Creek; also projects happening in Bass Coast, in Omeo and in Bairnsdale; and on the other side of the state in Nhill, Beaufort, Kyabram and Kerang. So we are working across the state and working with the federal health authorities, local tourism boards and other local agencies.

Mathew HILAKARI: What sort of employees are living in these accommodations? You say seasonal, so I can imagine for the alpine areas that is reasonably easy to understand that there are many people supporting that great tourist industry that we have there, but for other areas, are we looking at health professionals, education professionals, or what is the sort of scope of activity?

Jeroen WEIMAR: Thank you, Mr Hilakari. So many of these are in partnership with health authorities, so for example, Bass Coast Health, Colac Area Health, Goulburn Valley Health in Shepparton. So these are particularly accommodation for healthcare specialists, so often nurses. We know that from working with our health colleagues that some of our regional health authorities are struggling to attract nursing staff into those areas because of the lack of accommodation or the cost of accommodation, so it is a practical measure to bring some of that accommodation forward. Some of it, particularly if I was to say in Mount Hotham and Mount Buller, is around particularly the tourism industry, you know that seasonal worker industry. We are also looking

at some projects on the Great Ocean Road, so Colac and Timboon in particular, where again there are significant tourism developments where we are looking to support some of that accommodation.

Bev McARTHUR: Where are the projects on the Great Ocean Road?

Jeroen WEIMAR: The close ones that have got at the moment are Colac Area Health, which have got some operation down on the Great Ocean Road. Timboon also and Warrnambool at the far end.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

Meng Heang TAK: Just to follow on from previous questions, I have heard a lot about the cost of building in metropolitan areas, the construction has gone up and all of that, but can you tell the committee the cost of building in outer suburban communities?

Jeroen WEIMAR: So outer suburban community developments? Yes, and I think if you look at the pattern of Victoria's and particularly Melbourne's housing market over the last 10 or 15 years or so, the greenfield areas in the growth area suburbs – and I appreciate a number of colleagues on the committee have electorates in that area – have seen the biggest share of housing growth. Around 50 per cent of all the new homes built in Victoria in the last 10 years or so have been in those greenfield areas, and that again is why that greenfield plan has been so important in order to give clarity and shape to that structure. But it also comes together with the growth area infrastructure funding components, so this provides for a provision of funding towards infrastructure being paid for by developers. We have announced around \$400 million of that funding recently. There is another \$150 million program about to be announced in the coming months. Getting the balance right of investing in infrastructure into those communities and providing a significant pipeline of land is important. We are also working now with industry. We have around 170,000 lots of land which have planning approval, all in these growth areas, but which are currently constrained and difficult to access. Sometimes that is because developers are working in different orders or we have not got the drainage arrangements in place at this point in time, so we are looking to see how we can work with developers and local councils to streamline that process to release more of those lots into the market when the demand is ready to come forward.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you. My last question touches on the growth areas infrastructure fund. Can you just tell us a little bit more about what is funded in that?

Jeroen WEIMAR: Yes, GAIC, or the growth area infrastructure fund, has been around for 14 years or so and provides for a standardised infrastructure contribution rate on all development, but it only applies to those growth area suburbs, recognising of course the cost when you are converting paddocks into residential properties and the provision of parks, the provision of schools and the provision of local services and infrastructure. It is a particularly important element for local councils in those areas, recognising the increasing residential footprint that they will provide. It only applies to seven of those growth areas – so Cardinia, Casey, Hume, Melton, Mitchell, Whittlesea and Wyndham – and it is a one-off contribution that the developers make. We are now working with the property industry on reviewing those infrastructure contributions, recognising of course that all parts of our residential market need support and need provision of local infrastructure. It has been a particular feature for our activity centre program to ensure that there are appropriate infrastructure contributions made to that infill kind of development, so over the coming months we will continue to work with Treasury colleagues and Planning colleagues around providing an appropriate infrastructure contribution regime through industry and with councils.

Mathew HILAKARI: Sewers seem to be a commonality across these hearings and also the budget hearings. I understand there are particular challenges around that. Have we got any intent in that area as well?

Jeroen WEIMAR: We have. We are doing some work with Melbourne Water at the moment, and probably the biggest challenge for greenfield development post approval is providing appropriate water drainage infrastructure. Drainage of course does not conveniently align with ownership boundaries; it flows where it wants to go, so the design –

Mathew HILAKARI: Hopefully not. Hopefully it stays in the pipe where possible.

Jeroen WEIMAR: Hopefully. It is around providing appropriate drainage networks across the whole area. That is where that master planning work is so important. We are now working with Melbourne Water around how we can simplify and speed up some of the support they provide to that.

The CHAIR: Thank you. We are going to go straight to Mr Puglielli.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Chair. Good morning. Can I just ask some questions about the Victorian interpreting and translating service LanguageLoop – the state translating service? Is that all right?

Brigid SUNDERLAND: Yes.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Wonderful. I have been speaking to quite a few community members who rely on these services as well as social and health workers and other service providers who regularly use translating services to support their clients. I have also spoken with translators who work for government-provided translation services, and I have heard some pretty dodgy stuff. There was a child protection information brochure which when translated into simplified Chinese was missing information on human rights and child safe standards – we are talking a 15-page doc being reduced to a one-pager. I heard of translators who have argued with social workers and told clients that they did not have to do what was being suggested and did not have to answer questions or those who have chastised clients for using English in a call and have told them they must only speak through the interpreter. There are other examples, but – knowing that many translators in our state do a wonderful job and provide excellent service – too many of these stories are out there where people have not been provided with a professional, impartial translation. So what are you doing to improve quality assurance in translation services?

Brigid SUNDERLAND: You had better take this.

Jeremi MOULE: Can I just clarify: are you asking about translation services that are provided by the government or by LanguageLoop? Or is it a more general –

Aiv PUGLIELLI: I am happy to keep the net wide, if that is useful for answering the question.

Jeremi MOULE: LanguageLoop, for example, does have some specified standards around performance and the way it goes around its business. In relation to the regulation of other translation services that may be available commercially or through some other arrangements, I am not sure of the regulation requirements for those.

Brigid SUNDERLAND: Thanks, Secretary. There are a couple of things I would raise just in response to your question, which I think go to what the Secretary was just referencing. Those particular complaints that you are referring to, we do not have visibility of those. They are not things that have been brought to our attention. It might be something we take offline. If those sorts of things are happening, we obviously would not want them to be happening and would want them addressed, absolutely. But in terms of what we are seeing, it is obviously the contractors who work for LanguageLoop, and then there would be, as the Secretary said, contractors who would be working for other providers, which may account for some of what you are describing. But in terms of LanguageLoop itself, we are undertaking quite significant reform in partnership with them over the employment model. At the moment they do use a lot of contractors, and we are doing some work around moving those contractors to an employment-based model, which will then mean LanguageLoop has got a different relationship with its workforce. I think that might go in part to addressing maybe some of the concerns you have raised. As I said, I am not aware of those concerns and they have not been brought to our attention, but certainly we would follow them up if you would like us to.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Yes, for sure. Could you talk about what those reforms are a little bit more?

Brigid SUNDERLAND: Yes, I can. At the moment it is a state business model – so corporation – and it is actually one of the largest that we have got. From my notes here, and this work has been underway for quite a period of time – I do not know if you have got visibility of it, but I think it goes back quite some way, just looking at moving from contractors to an employment-based model, so supporting that transition – there has been some government funding given to LanguageLoop just to help with some IT upgrades and some existing changes around payroll and some of the nuts and bolts of managing a workforce differently. Some support is

being provided to the organisation to help with that transition, and that is well underway. As I said, it has been underway for a while, but it is well advanced.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: So in that reform that is translators being employed by the government rather than being contracted out?

Brigid SUNDERLAND: Employed by LanguageLoop.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: By LanguageLoop?

Brigid SUNDERLAND: That is right, yes.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: In terms of the complaints system processes, how can they be improved so that we ensure that there is accountability for poor translation services where they are occurring?

Brigid SUNDERLAND: A couple of key aspects to that: I suspect, depending on the arrangements that we have got in place with LanguageLoop, providing a vehicle through LanguageLoop back to the relevant departments – DGS and other departments who use those services – so that we have a visibility of those, any issues that are arising. But as I said, they are well connected in with various different parts of government. For example, Court Services use LanguageLoop. They would have their own internal mechanisms for complaints or concerns being raised.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: In terms of the existing professional standards for this space, can you speak a bit about what those are currently?

Brigid SUNDERLAND: I would have to take that on notice in terms of the detail of those specific standards.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: That is okay. Thank you. I might just move on to electoral reforms and our electoral system. Reform of the upper house: has the department inquired as to how much lead time would be needed by the VEC to move to a Senate-style voting system where people can number their preferences above the line, as recommended by the Electoral Matters Committee?

Jeremi MOULE: Sorry, you go, Mr Puls.

Joshua PULS: Obviously we have had the electoral review expert panel and then the Electoral Matters Committee also, and then the department will respond to requests for advice from the government, as we normally do, in relation to issues that the government wants further advice about. Ultimately, the response to these various reports is a matter for the government and not for the department.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Has that advice been sought by the government?

Jeremi MOULE: No, it has not.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: None at all from the department?

Joshua PULS: On that question, no, I do not think so.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. Wow. Is the department prepared to give that advice to government should it request it?

Jeremi MOULE: On any matters that is our function, yes.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: I am looking forward to that request coming through. Has there been any other preparation work that has been undertaken to date by the department to pre-empt any potential changes to upper house voting?

Jeremi MOULE: No. I think it was yesterday the VEC provided its response to the recommendations, so we had visibility for the first time of their views on those recs. It is now for the government to form a view on which, if any of those, it might want to pursue, and then we would certainly support the government in

provision of advice, whether it is on that issue or on the very many recommendations that there were in that report coming out of the committee.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. On to local government, has the department received any feedback from the VEC regarding resourcing requirements for local government elections given the broad rollout of single-member wards?

Joshua PULS : They are a portfolio agency of the department, and so just as we do with all portfolio agencies, we are in continuing conversations about their budget. Certainly the change to single-member wards has budget implications, and that is a continuing conversation we have with them.

Jeremi MOULE: I think in due course, Mr Puglielli, the VEC will review its activity and no doubt provide a report to government on that, and that may then go into some detail on what they did feel in terms of implications of the new model that was in place for the recently concluded local government elections.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Sure. In terms of the feedback that has been received to date from the VEC, what was the nature of that feedback?

Jeremi MOULE: In relation to the local government elections?

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Yes, the change to the single-member ward system.

Jeremi MOULE: We probably have not had any direct or formal feedback outside what would be our normal engagement with them as a portfolio agency in their preparation for local government elections. Obviously the decision was made I think at the start of last calendar year or formalised at the start of last calendar year. So the VEC had a period of lead-in time aware of the nature of how the elections would be conducted this year. There has probably been nothing specific at this stage. They have now conducted those and concluded them, and we would expect if they have feedback that that would come in due course.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Is it the department's view that the VEC has had enough resources allocated to deal with that change?

Jeremi MOULE: I do not think we have a view on that at this stage. Once we get from them advice on their activities – what was required and expected of them, whether it created a greater burden or a lesser burden than anticipated – I think we would be in a better position to understand that.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: I might move on to the *Yoorrook for Justice* report. It has been over a year since that historic report came through, but according to the government's latest progress report, the Victorian government still backs less than 15 per cent of the commission's recommendations. Does the department have a view as to why the government has not accepted, for example, Yoorrook's calls for a complete ban on solitary confinement in our prisons?

Jeremi MOULE: I might ask Mr Garwood to answer that question. Thank you.

Terry GARWOOD: Thanks, Mr Puglielli. The *Yoorrook for Justice* report, as you quite rightly point out, was received by the government on the dates you outlined, some time ago. The government put a response out to that report, accepting a number of the recommendations, indicating a number of others that would be under consideration and I think three or four that were not supported. So the government has, if you like, responded to the Yoorrook commission. Yoorrook is continuing its work, as you know, and they are due to finish at the end of June next year by producing a final report. I think by 27 June they will also produce what is called an interim report, so they will come out very closely together. The government has taken the position that it has responded to, if you like, the second interim report *Yoorrook for Justice*. The matters that are in there are on the public record, what the government's position is, so I am really not able to go to any more than what has been provided in the government's public response to each of the recommendations.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. I appreciate that. I suppose my query is if there is a view of the department as to why to date we have not seen the adoption of a complete ban on solitary confinement in prisons. Is there a view of the department?

Jeremi MOULE: Yes. The decisions on how to respond to recommendations from any commission, including Yoorrook, are certainly matters for the executive. The advice that we would provide them in supporting them to determine the government's position would be subject to executive privilege, so we cannot go into that in any detail. Certainly it was the department's responsibility to provide advice, information and context to the government in relation to all of the recommendations, as specific departments who would have had obligations to their ministers would have done for them as well. As Mr Garwood said, a very small number of the recommendations were ruled out by government, a small number were accepted and others are subject to further work.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. I might move to a different example. Does the department have a view as to why the government has not accepted calls for free phone calls in prisons?

Jeremi MOULE: Mr Puglielli, I am afraid I am going to have to give you the same answer. Again, we did provide advice, context and information about all of the recommendations, including that one. Decisions on how to respond and when in fact to respond to each of those recommendations are matters for the executive.

Terry GARWOOD: I could just add to the Secretary's comment. The commission, I understand, intends to ask a number of ministers to come back early next year for further conversation about the response to the *Yoorrook for Justice* second interim report, so there will be another opportunity for, if you like, more public accountability about the government's decision-making through those appearances.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. Victoria is about to begin historic negotiations for treaty. Given the government's failure to accept some of those recommendations, like those I have mentioned from the *Yoorrook for Justice* report, what is the department doing to build trust with First Nations groups throughout this process?

Jeremi MOULE: Before I hand to Mr Garwood, I think the journey of treaty now has been seven or eight years. I think it is uncharted territory in some respects in an Australian context. I think that the relationship of trust has been very strong, particularly under the last couple of terms of the First Peoples' Assembly. That is not to say that we have agreed on everything on the way through, and that will certainly be the case as we move into treaty negotiations, where the state and the First Peoples' Assembly will have views about things that are for negotiation, but I feel like there is a strong trust relationship that exists at the moment, as the department and its activities have been consistent with both the Act but also the policies and intent of this government, which are to deliver treaty and to improve outcomes for Aboriginal Victorians. Mr Garwood, would you like to add to that answer?

Terry GARWOOD: I would really like to add to that answer, Secretary, because the simple answer to the question is that the government is doing what it said it would do, and when you do that you build trust. The government said it would enter into the treaty process, and it has done that; it is done that over eight years, and the evidence of that is the developments that have occurred to take us to this point. By that I mean the establishment of the Aboriginal Treaty Working Group involving First Peoples in 2016; the establishment of the Victorian Treaty Advancement Commission in 2018; the passage of legislation with the *Advancing the Treaty Process with Aboriginal Victorians Act 2018*; the establishment of the inaugural First Peoples' Assembly in 2019; the agreement of the relevant elements under the advancing the treaty Act – for example, the treaty negotiation framework, which is publicly available on our website; the dispute resolution process, which is also publicly available on the department's website; the passage of the second piece of legislation, which was the *Treaty Authority and Other Treaty Elements Act 2022*; the establishment of the Self-Determination Fund, with funds provided in that to enable First Peoples to be more equal partners in the treaty negotiation process; the election of the second chamber of the First Peoples' Assembly last year; the appointment of the Treaty Authority members in late 2023; the opening of the treaty negotiations database, which occurred this year through the Treaty Authority; and the confirmation of the First Peoples' Assembly as the negotiating party with the state in relation to statewide treaty negotiations. My point is that doing what you say is how you build trust, and that is what has occurred.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: I completely agree. On that point, though, the government committed over a year ago to raise the age of criminal responsibility to 14. They have now gone back on that decision. Does the department have any internal justification they can provide as to why the government has done that?

Jeremi MOULE: The decisions of the executive on any policy issue, including that one, are certainly its prerogative. I think there was a question earlier about whether the department's advice changed on that matter. I think it was inferring that it might have changed because we had a change of Premier. That is not the case. The advice that we would have provided and have provided to the former Premier and this Premier would have been consistent, and then the decision-making is for the government of the day.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Was it a political decision?

Jeremi MOULE: It was a decision by the executive government, and I think that is their job.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: I might move on to the housing statement, if that is okay. On the housing statement, a progress update released in September 2024 notes that works are underway regarding the redevelopment of public housing towers, which would see our existing public housing towers demolished. What specifically was accomplished regarding this project in 2023–24, and is the government on track for its goals for these towers?

Jeroen WEIMAR: Thanks, Mr Puglielli. Obviously Homes Victoria and DFFH are leading the program around the public housing towers, so I would probably encourage you to look at the detail with them. As to the overall housing program, obviously some progress has been made from Homes Victoria at North Melbourne and at Flemington in terms of the already committed program to progressively replace those towers. My understanding is that Homes Victoria are working on the relocation of families into new accommodation which is on-site, so I think they have a decanting process around previously completed buildings, new buildings, being available for tenants to move into so they can remain on the same site. There will be various market-led processes happening in the coming months around the procurement of new replacement buildings on those sites. The government has also announced that there will be two further towers at Richmond and one at South Yarra that will also be part of that progressive program.

I think in terms of what was announced in the housing statement, it was a 25- to 30-year program of replacing progressively the 44 public housing towers. I think Homes Victoria now have active programs underway for the first seven of those and are able to communicate very clearly with the tenants of those buildings to say 'This is when that replacement will take place' and are working on principles of ensuring that people can remain within the precinct in which they currently live, which is why this will be a progressive evolution over the years ahead.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Specifically for the period 2023–24, and I understand some of this detail may extend beyond this department, can you just go into a bit more information just to clarify what actually took place during that period of time?

Jeroen WEIMAR: I would refer you to Homes Victoria and DFFH. Essentially they have the accountability and the responsibility for managing that program. I would refer you to them.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. On a completely unrelated matter, could I ask why multicultural affairs output moved to DPC from the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing during the 2023–24? What operationally did that achieve?

Jeremi MOULE: When Premier Allan commenced she made some changes to the ministry and also some machinery-of-government changes. One of those was to bring multicultural affairs into the Premier's department. It has previously been in the Premier's department, and it is one of the portfolios that from time to time does move between being in the central agency, in DPC, or in another department. The other machinery of government that I mentioned earlier was that Industrial Relations Victoria moved to DTF – again a move that over the history of departments has occurred from time to time. The machinery of government and the assignment of ministries is unilaterally at the prerogative of the Premier, and her preference was to have that portfolio, multicultural affairs, part of her department.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Is there any more information you can provide as to why that was a preference that was given?

Jeremi MOULE: No. We would not have any because that was the decision that the Premier made. It is probably a question best directed to her at her next appearance here.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Sure, and you mentioned the industrial relations output movement as well. For both of these examples is there any operational difference that occurs when a change like that takes place?

Jeremi MOULE: Not significantly so. I mean, sometimes the decision by a Premier of the day to move a portfolio into their department might indicate an interest and a want to be more deeply engaged with that portfolio. Other times it can be as simple as around sort of finding a balance of departmental responsibilities and so on, so there is a range of considerations that the Premier of the day would give to the allocation of ministries and which departments they are housed in.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Mr Puglielli. We are going to go straight to Mr Hilakari.

Mathew HILAKARI: Thank you, Secretary and officials, for attending today. I might continue on the matter of multiculturalism in Victoria. It is important to many people in the community that I represent and many of those here. I would like to particularly take us to the investments and support for multicultural and multifaith communities and the way that we support them as a state government, particularly in the department and the significant budget spend. I think it is \$24 million and then going on to \$28 million this year. What are those funds used for and how do they bring Victoria to be a more cohesive state?

Jeremi MOULE: Thank you. I will ask Ms Sunderland to go into some detail, but I did touch on some of these matters in the opening presentation. I think that it is an objective of the portfolio to make sure that we are an inclusive society, that communities have an opportunity to celebrate their cultures and also share them with everyone else. A lot of the investments that are made through the multicultural affairs portfolio, whether it is support for events and activities or whether it is support around cultural safety and other initiatives, are really around achieving that high-level objective. But I will ask Ms Sunderland to go into some detail on some of the initiatives.

Brigid SUNDERLAND: Absolutely, I can take you through. As the Secretary said, it is a portfolio that we are terribly proud of and the work that they do. It spans quite a range of activity and, as you said, significant investment. In terms of your comment on the number of different faiths and cultures, we have got 300 ancestries in Victoria, 290 languages and almost 200 different faiths being practised. That is reflected then in the breadth of work that the portfolio delivers. At this stage in the 2023–24 reporting period we have 678 multicultural festivals, which the Secretary spoke to, so that is 1.5 million people who have in some capacity attended or participated in one of those festivals and that is an amazing celebration of culture, bringing people together and exposing people to different traditions. We also have an \$8.2 million fund for multicultural infrastructure projects. I will not list them all; they are in the annual report. We go through in the annual report quite a level of detail around the different grants that are issued and the work that that means for local communities. Some of them are quite small grants and communities do amazing things with those grants to refurbish community meeting rooms or put bathrooms, toilets and kitchens in facilities. It can be quite grassroots infrastructure work, but it makes a big difference for community.

In terms of some of the other programs, I would not mind being able to just speak to them, because they do bring such a lot of joy to the community. Our seniors program is one that is particularly remarkable in terms of what we can do with a small amount of money in terms of reaching significant communities across a number of LGAs. That particular program in 2023–24 reached a thousand different organisations – over a thousand groups – across 46 LGAs, so that is over 130,000 multicultural seniors having access to this program. What that does is it really brings seniors groups together, so it provides an opportunity for people in terms of social isolation and addressing that through fostering social connections, bringing senior people together to celebrate their culture, pass it on and preserve it but also to support information and skills development around using technology and mobile phones – some of the things where senior people come together and improve their digital access, have access to how to be safe on the internet and that sort of thing. Some of these organisations are delivering really practical support to seniors groups but also bringing them together to celebrate culture and traditions. We have been running that program for a number of years now. They are small grants of up to \$8000. Some of them are even smaller than that but are doing amazing things. We manage the grants process ourselves and then the organisations run the programs. 141 different, unique ethnic groups are supported by that program, so it is quite remarkable.

In terms of some of the other work in the portfolio, I mentioned the multicultural festivals and events. I can speak to a bit more detail about that if that is helpful for the committee.

Mathew HILAKARI: I am particularly interested – you mentioned 46 LGAs for those seniors programs, but could you talk more broadly about what we do across Victoria, because it is not just metro Melbourne. We have got some really great festivals here, some great events here, but what does that look like statewide?

Brigid SUNDERLAND: I think it must be close to about 20 per cent – yes, that is the number I have got here – of those festivals and events, for example, that are in regional and rural parts of Victoria. So a couple of lived examples, more recently, that the team have worked on: in Shepparton we had the Albanian Moslim Society festival; that was a \$15,000 grant to deliver that and an opportunity to celebrate Albanian culture and cuisine, promote mutual understanding and cooperation amongst cultural groups. So they had an event at the Shepparton Queens Gardens with traditional Albanian music, dancing, food, and fruit and vegetable markets, so a real opportunity for the local community of Shepparton to come together with the Albanian community of Shepparton and celebrate culture and tradition.

Mathew HILAKARI: Did you get a chance to attend?

Brigid SUNDERLAND: I did not. I might need some time off to do some attending, Secretary.

Mathew HILAKARI: It sounds like an important part of your work, so I think that is a recommendation for her as well.

Brigid SUNDERLAND: Leave pass. We actually recently had an Ethnic Communities Council function for Harmony Week celebrations in Albury–Wodonga. We had a two-week cultural exhibition up there, with various celebrations; First Nations people were involved and played a prominent role in that event as well, so a real opportunity just to celebrate culture in that sort of gateway.

Mathew HILAKARI: I think many of us here were honoured to be at the Premier's multicultural gala dinner in Geelong, which is the first time it has been in regional Victoria, and that it was a really great success. Just talking to the Multicultural Community Infrastructure Fund, could you take us through some of the supports that have been provided and what we hope those outcomes will be?

Brigid SUNDERLAND: I can. As I said, there is quite a list. So it is \$8 million across 30 different organisations listed in the annual report, and as I said they can be different infrastructure grants. One of the more recent ones was around a small temple, a Buddhist temple that needed literally just some paint, floors being done, quite practical things that make a difference to the environment that people come together in. So they are small grants; larger grants can be, say, the Vietnamese Museum was one of the announcements and one of the projects we have underway, so that would be a larger infrastructure grant that we are progressing work on at the moment.

Mathew HILAKARI: Just in terms of – and Secretary, with your permission, I reckon we will be here anyway – the Bachar Houli Foundation, the Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria, and the Victorian African communities fund, I will start to unpack each of those because they are important programs that the government through DPC runs. What are some of the barriers that people face initially to participation in sports and in the broader society in employment and education, and what is some of the reasoning that we are actually putting forward there?

Brigid SUNDERLAND: Absolutely. The Bachar Houli fund that you just mentioned is an interesting one, because that is actually targeting girls and women. They are some additional barriers, so not just cultural barriers but also gender-based barriers to participation in sport. So that work is really around looking at younger girls, and looking at their leadership capability, their confidence in being a part of a sporting team, looking at mentoring opportunities. So it is quite a unique project in the sense that it is not just addressing some of the cultural barriers that you spoke to, like equal participation and inclusion, but also some gender obstacles, so to speak, to inclusion. So that sort of goes to both of those issues, that particular program.

Mathew HILAKARI: I will take you firstly to the *Victorian African Communities Action Plan*. I am particularly interested in employment brokers as part of the program, so if you could outline the broad program and then come to that specifically.

Brigid SUNDERLAND: I am very happy to speak to that program. So that action plan that you refer to – \$4.5 million in the 2023–24 budget – had a couple of component parts in acquitting the objectives of that plan, so we had the homework clubs, we had employment brokers, we had the school community liaison officers and some AOD support work as well. I can go into a bit more detail about those initiatives under the action plan, but importantly also the auspicing of the Victorian African Communities Committee, so having that sort of infrastructure to make sure that the action plan really reflected the needs of community and listened to voice the community and what the community was asking for and experiencing, so it is really kind of a cooperative piece of work, the action plan. In terms of the employment brokers, that has been a very successful program. We have supported more than 680 jobseekers of African descent to basically reach employment outcomes. While it has not been 100 per cent delivery in terms of every single person resulting in a job, it is actually very high in terms of its performance outcomes for job placement. We have employed the brokers. They have worked hand in glove with local communities on developing skills, looking at opportunities and providing really practical support around CV development, how to present at an interview and building the confidence to then participate in the workplace. We have had some really pleasing outcomes there.

The homework clubs are really practical support for –

Mathew HILAKARI: Just on the employment brokers, that was almost 700, you mentioned in your initial presentation. Are we following and tracking and seeing the employment experience over time? I have got no expectation that someone stays in the same job. You know, people move across employment industries all the time; there is a big churn. But are we following their experiences and seeing what their employment pathway is following that – whether they are still in work or whether they have gone into new work?

Brigid SUNDERLAND: I would need to just follow up on the exact nature of the follow-up. Certainly those relationships are developed and they are very strong between the person being placed and the employment broker; that is part of why the program works so effectively. Sometimes that relationship will continue in terms of support post the placement. That would give us visibility of how that person is going and the length of the placement and how well that is progressing, but I would need to just follow up in terms of the formal mechanism that we would have to track or follow people over a longer period of time.

Mathew HILAKARI: And the homework club that you were just about to talk about – is that located down in Cranbourne? Is that the location of it?

Brigid SUNDERLAND: I think we have got a couple. I would need to just double-check the exact locations of the homework clubs.

Mathew HILAKARI: If it is, the Member for Cranbourne is very, very proud of that program. But I would love to hear about it more.

Brigid SUNDERLAND: As I said, the reason I sort of hesitated for a moment is there are probably about 17 different locations.

Mathew HILAKARI: Fantastic.

Brigid SUNDERLAND: Yes, so we have got a few different organisations delivering that program. We have got 1350 children supported throughout the program across 53 schools, so quite a breadth in terms of, again, practical support to families, children needing help with their homework and, particularly when there are language difficulties or cultural barriers, just helping those parents with those children engage with their homework and participate better in school.

Mathew HILAKARI: Have we done any assessment? Do people do a survey at the end of it? How do they assess whether they are satisfied with it or unsatisfied with it, and can you provide the locations of those or which LGAs those 17 are in?

Brigid SUNDERLAND: Yes. I would be very happy to take that on notice if you like and come back to you with those details.

Mathew HILAKARI: Thank you. In terms of the presentation itself, we did go through the multicultural seniors program, and we have been a little bit through that already. Do they run in regional Victoria as well?

Brigid SUNDERLAND: Yes, absolutely. They have got good statewide coverage.

Mathew HILAKARI: Okay. I am just going to move maybe to the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap*. I will start here, and I think I will end up with Mr Garwood reasonably soon. The Victorian government is obviously committed to the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap*, and that is through our state's partnership forum. I have just seen how DPC has been supporting that program, so if you could speak to some of the actions that we have been taking and whether we have had successes or have more work to do.

Jeremi MOULE: I will go directly to Mr Garwood.

Terry GARWOOD: Okay. First of all, I have to acknowledge that the Secretary actually jointly chairs the partnership forum with the co-chairs of Ngaweeyan Maar-oo, who are our partners in terms of First Nations Closing the Gap work, so that gives you a sense of the partnership commitment – that as the head of the public service the secretary of the department sits with First Peoples in co-chairing. But more generally than that, all the secretaries of all departments are members of the partnership forum, as well as the Chief Commissioner of Police, and we also then have all of the sector representatives from across Victoria of Aboriginal community controlled organisations, so the sector representatives and various organisational representatives. So the connection between DPC, First Nations communities – Aboriginal community controlled organisations – is very close and very intense.

Moving to more the specifics about the process, under the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap* there is a joint council of ministers chaired by the Commonwealth minister for Indigenous affairs. Our minister, the Minister for Treaty and First Peoples Minister Hutchins is a member of the joint council. DPC's role is to support and assist the minister in her participation in the joint council. The focus of that is the implementation plan that we have for Closing the Gap, and that is reported on regularly both through the partnership forum and also through the joint council.

In terms of just moving into the specifics of Closing the Gap, there is a huge amount of work that goes on in that space. There are mixed results, I would have to say, but we are pleased with how things are moving. The Commonwealth Productivity Commission commended Victoria for the work that we have been doing in relation to Closing the Gap, specifically around transformation, which is in the area of treaty. They did criticise jurisdictions for a bit too much BAU, business as usual, but noted that Victoria is leading the way in relation to treaty. So from our perspective we are really pleased about the work that has been going on in relation to Closing the Gap.

Perhaps if I just move specifically to some of the work that has been going on, just to give you a sense of those particular performance indicators under Closing the Gap. That perhaps will take us into more specific information so that you can sort of get a sense of where we are at. For example – I will just run through – we report on Closing the Gap through the *Victorian Government Aboriginal Affairs Report*. It is reported annually, so we provide information on every single one of the performance measures and metrics under Closing the Gap. As I said earlier, there are some mixed results in there, but we are really pleased with some of the areas that we have been leading in. For example, in the justice area there are significant reductions in juvenile justice custodial settings, significant reductions in custodial settings in the adult system and a range of other areas where we have been doing very well. Some areas that are still very challenging for us: out of home care placements we would like to improve significantly. The Minister for Children, that portfolio, is very focused on the child protection area, in seeking to address that particular area, which is an area we think we need some additional action on.

From our perspective in relation to Closing the Gap, we have got very strong foundation partnership work with Ngaweeyan Maar-oo. In fact with Ngaweeyan Maar-oo actually developing the new implementation plan, which has to be developed by the end of June next year, they are responsible for pulling together the new implementation plan. That gives you an example of self-determination in action. They are looking at our results in relation to the 19 performance metrics under Closing the Gap, but I have to say that we are not satisfied with where we are, and we want to do more. We are particularly focused on doing more in relation to supporting self-determination through treaty and really upping our focus and work in that area, because at the end of the day, our focus on treaty is about closing the gap and empowering Aboriginal people through self-determination. That is our particular focus.

Secretary, I do not know if there is anything that you would like to add, because you are very actively involved in the process as well.

Jeremi MOULE: No, I think you have covered it, Mr Garwood. It is actually quite a privilege to co-chair that forum and sit with some really fantastic Aboriginal leaders, some of whom have been on the front line for 50-odd years in fact and now lead our really significant Aboriginal-controlled organisations. It is a real privilege.

Mathew HILAKARI: They do really extraordinary work, and we heard most recently in Parliament around some of that. I do want to take us to treaty, and I am glad that you have gone there. The treaty database – I am just hoping you can give a bit of a flavour of what that seeks to achieve and where that fits in with the steps around treaty.

Terry GARWOOD: Thank you for the question, Mr Hilakari. The negotiation database is a sort of mechanism, a publicly accountable mechanism, that says to all parties who are entered on the negotiation database that they are the party to negotiate treaty. In our case, the First Peoples' Assembly have been entered on the treaty negotiation database. They have been approved by the Treaty Authority, who are responsible for the treaty negotiation database. The First Peoples' Assembly has met the requirements to be entered onto that negotiation database, but it is a mechanism to enable all of the community to understand who the negotiating parties are. Eventually we can see over time that, for example, as we move beyond the statewide treaty, which we are about to commence negotiations on, the legislation also provides for local treaties. You will see local traditional owner groups, if you like, registered on the treaty negotiation database as being treaty ready to negotiate treaties. You cannot negotiate them until you are on the database. It is a very critical public accountability mechanism to enable the whole community to have confidence in who has standing to negotiate treaty. As I said, the First Peoples' Assembly have been registered, and we expect to see over time traditional owner corporations entered onto the treaty negotiation database. Once they have approval from the Treaty Authority – because the Treaty Authority, as the Secretary indicated in the presentation, is the independent umpire; they basically look at and analyse people's status when saying that they are able to negotiate treaty, who they are and what their standing is et cetera – we will see that that negotiation database will be an important public accountability mechanism in the treaty process.

Mathew HILAKARI: And that ability to have that clarity and that openness – I can go onto the website right now and have a look at the database and look through a map of Victoria and see exactly where everything is up to. I think that is a really important thing for all Victorians to have that confidence, and they should have that confidence. Thank you.

Terry GARWOOD: Very true.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Hilakari.

Secretary and officials, that brings our time together this afternoon to an end. Thank you very much for coming and appearing before the committee today. The committee will follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing, and responses are required within five working days of the committee's request. The committee is now going to take a break before beginning its consideration of the Department of Government Services at 1:30 pm.

I declare this hearing adjourned.

Witnesses withdrew.