

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2023–24 Financial and Performance Outcomes

Melbourne – Thursday 21 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

Kate Houghton, Secretary,

Ryan Phillips, Associate Secretary,

Adrian Sculthorpe, Deputy Secretary, Aboriginal Justice,

Andrea Davidson, Commissioner, Youth Justice,

Bill Kyriakopoulos, Deputy Secretary, Police, Racing, Victims and Coordination,

Corinne Cadilhac, Deputy Secretary, Corporate Services and Infrastructure,

Emma Catford, Deputy Secretary, Corrections and Justice Services,

Jodi Henderson, Deputy Secretary, Youth Justice,

Kate Fitzgerald, Deputy Secretary, Emergency Management,

Melissa Westin, Acting Commissioner, Corrections Victoria,

Marian Chapman, Deputy Secretary, Courts, Civil and Criminal Law,

Nicola Brown, Deputy Secretary, People, Safety, Culture and Communications,

Allyson Lardner, Emergency Management Commissioner

Samuel Ho, Chief Financial Officer,

Toby Hemming, Deputy Secretary, Integrity, Regulation and Legal Services, Department of Justice and Community Safety;

Jenni Rigby, Chief Executive, Emergency Management Victoria;

Mariela Diaz, Chief Executive Officer, Emergency Recovery Victoria; and

Shane Patton, Chief Commissioner, Victoria Police, and

Susan Delroi, Deputy Secretary, Corporate and Regulatory Services, Victoria Police.

The CHAIR: I declare open this hearing of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee. 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. We pay our respects to them, their culture, their elders past, present and future and elders from other communities who may be 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 this hearing may not be protected by this privilege.

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

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

I welcome the Secretary for the Department of Justice and Community Safety Ms Kate Houghton as well as our chief commissioner Shane Patton and other officials who have joined us here today. Secretary, I invite you to make an opening statement or presentation of no more than 10 minutes, after which time the committee will ask you some questions. Your time starts now.

Kate HOUGHTON: Thank you, Chair. I first wish to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land that we are meeting on today, the Wurundjeri people, and I would also like to pay my respects to elders past and present and all Aboriginal people in the room today.

The department remains committed to our vision of a just, safe and resilient Victoria. Our dedicated staff and volunteers have delivered some extraordinary achievements in 2023–24.

Visual presentation.

Kate HOUGHTON: Last year Victoria experienced floods, storms and fire emergencies. We thank our workforce, emergency service partners and volunteers for keeping Victorians safe and assisting them in their recovery. The department also delivered many government priorities in 2023–24 alongside our critical statutory functions. As you are aware, DJCS leads the delivery of justice and community safety services in Victoria. The department develops and implements laws, regulations and policies across all of the justice portfolios and operates significant service systems, including the state's adult corrections, youth justice and emergency management systems. In 2023–24 we administered a total output cost of \$5.9 billion, including grant funding to emergency service organisations. DJCS and its entities employed 10,543 full-time equivalent employees. The department also delivered an extensive infrastructure program, completing eight initiatives valued at over \$340 million.

Improving justice outcomes for Aboriginal people remains a key priority for the department. This year we continued our engagement with the important work of the Yoorrook Justice Commission. Other achievements included administering the stolen generations reparations package, which seeks to address the lasting social, emotional and economic impacts caused by the forced removal of Aboriginal children. As at 30 June 2024, 849 applications have been received and reparation payments of \$54.7 million have been made to 555 applicants. The department also administered \$38.7 million in grant funding to improve justice outcomes for Victorian Aboriginal communities, with 98 per cent of this funding provided to Aboriginal organisations. We continue to work in partnership with the Aboriginal Justice Caucus to reduce the over-representation of Aboriginal people in the justice system.

In regard to emergency management, the department continued to reform and improve the state's systems and processes to prevent and respond to emergencies. In 2023–24 this included the establishment of Triple Zero Victoria as part of the reforms to Victoria's 000 call taking and dispatch service. We continued building community resilience and reducing risk through the administration of a number of grants and projects: \$4.5 million in grants for 31 risk and resilience projects, \$5.1 million for 18 state and regional priority projects and \$26 million for 31 disaster-ready fund projects. We also responded to significant flood events in December 2023 and January 2024 and storms and bushfires in February 2024. We have improved our emergency management communications, including support for the VicEmergency app, which delivered approximately 55 million warnings to users in 24 hours during the February 2024 storm event.

In the corrections portfolio, on 1 July 2023 a new primary healthcare model was rolled out across all public prisons as part of the implementation of the health quality framework for Victorian prisons in 2023. Custodial primary health services transitioned to new providers, and Aboriginal cultural safety standards were embedded in health service delivery across the public prison system. In June 2024 major reforms to the men's prison system were announced to deliver the modern services and infrastructure needed over the next decade to support staff and people in custody. This included the announcement of opening the Western Plains Correctional Centre in mid-2025. New and upgraded infrastructure has also been opened, including the Aboriginal healing centre at the Dame Phyllis Frost Centre and a refurbished 26-bed unit to support elderly people in custody at Langi Kal Kal Prison.

In regard to youth justice, the youth justice portfolio featured most notably the introduction of the *Youth Justice Bill* in 2024, which has gone on to pass the Parliament and become the first standalone Act for Victoria's youth justice system. The new youth justice facility at Cherry Creek began accommodating young people, with

56 beds plus an eight-bed mental health unit currently funded to be operational. Malmsbury youth justice precinct ceased operations. Custodial health services were also reformed in youth justice, with custodial precincts transitioned to having their primary health care provided through public or community health providers, and the custodial forensic youth mental health service also expanded to provide additional capacity and expertise. The department has also continued to support prevention, early intervention and diversion as the most effective and fiscally responsible ways to reduce youth crime.

In terms of crime prevention and victim support, in 2023–24 DJCS continued to provide support for victims of crime, including through the victims helpline, the victims assistance program and the child and youth witness service. Preparation for the launch of the victims of crime financial assistance scheme continued, and it was launched this Monday, on 18 November. The scheme replaces the Victims of Crime Assistance Tribunal and will make a significant difference to victims by expanding who can receive financial assistance and increasing the level of support available to support victims to recover. Also, a new child and youth witness service and intermediary program premises at Garrarak was launched. In crime prevention, the youth crime prevention program provided individual case management to 161 young people and prosocial activities for 644 people.

In regard to policing and road safety, Victoria Police continued to support community safety, including through large-scale operations and events such as the Land Forces 2024 exhibition and community engagement. Victoria Police have also carried out their internal operationalisation of the transition to a public health response in regard to public intoxication, with new policies, training and communications rolled out to support the new response. The department also operationalised the Victoria Police Death and Disability Benefits Contingency Fund and since October 2023 has approved 53 claims. We have also implemented Victoria's *Road Safety Strategy Action Plan 2021–23*. We have continued deployment of the new distracted driving and seatbelts road safety trailer-based technology in over 200 locations.

In regard to casino gaming and liquor, significant work has been undertaken to improve the regulatory regime, with extensive engagement to support reforms in relation to electronic gaming machines. All 33 recommendations of the Royal Commission into the Casino Operator and Licence have been fully implemented or are legislated and awaiting commencement. The casino has introduced mandatory precommitment and mandatory carded play for all gaming machines. Also, liquor control reform regulations in 2023 were made in July, which include a new risk-based liquor licensing fee model and new information requirements for licence applications.

In the racing portfolio a key achievement has been the implementation of the greyhound whole-of-life digital tracking program, which enables Greyhound Racing Victoria to take the location and health of registered greyhounds and record it on one consolidated digital platform.

In regard to legislation we have been exceptionally busy in delivering or supporting the government to deliver their extensive legislative program. A range of legislation passed in 2023–24 and was quite broad, from parole reform to a new licensing system for the private security industry. This work is done with extensive community stakeholder consultation on a range of these reforms before they make their way to the cabinet and into Bills for Parliament.

In closing I want to thank my departmental team for their ongoing commitment in delivering positive community safety outcomes for the Victorian community. We are keen to take your questions.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much, Secretary. The first lot of questions is going to Mr McGowan.

Nick McGOWAN: Thank you, Secretary, and welcome, one and all. The first question I have got really is around Triple Zero. That should come as no surprise. I understand that last night Triple Zero had to revert to pen and paper. Is that correct?

Kate HOUGHTON: That is correct. The deputy of emergency management has been contacting TZV last night and this morning to understand what they do know currently and what they are seeking to find out. If you want, I will pass to Kate Fitzgerald to talk you through what we currently understand in terms of the outage.

Nick McGOWAN: When you say they contacted them, was it by telephone or by Morse code?

Kate HOUGHTON: By telephone.

Nick McGOWAN: Awesome.

Kate FITZGERALD: By telephone. I spoke with the chair of Triple Zero Victoria and also the CEO on several occasions over the last 24 hours. What we do know is that at 5:30 pm yesterday afternoon there was an unplanned outage on Triple Zero Victoria's computer-aided dispatch system – their CAD system. The system was fully restored at 7:30 pm. During that time they implemented their business continuity arrangements to ensure minimal impact on community and on those calling 000. Those business continuity arrangements are well practised by Triple Zero Victoria, and they are consistent with other jurisdictions that operate 000 systems. Triple Zero Victoria immediately briefed the minister's office and also the department, and the Triple Zero Victoria board is meeting today to understand the cause and impact of the outage. And Triple Zero immediately commenced undertaking diagnostic analysis to understand what the cause of the outage was.

Nick McGOWAN: It is quite breathtaking, isn't it, really that in 2024, yet again, for the gazillions this government has spent on Triple Zero – the name changes, the branding exercises – we are still reverting to pen and paper for 2 hours during what I guess is a peak time for calls, and we have no way of ever knowing what the consequence of that is. You call it contingencies; I would just call it a complete cock-up of monumental proportions. To revert to pen and paper in 2024 – how can the public have any confidence in the system when that is what it has to revert to?

Kate FITZGERALD: We will understand the impacts and the cause of the outage of last night, and that is the work that Triple Zero is absolutely prioritising at the moment. I think in terms of the investment that has been made in the next-generation CAD system, that is why government has made an investment in delivering upon a new CAD system, and we are very close to appointing a vendor in relation to the delivery of that next-generation CAD system, and that will obviously improve the reliability and functionality of the current CAD system.

Nick McGOWAN: I recall being here, was it in May, and we were talking about looking forward to appointing the vendor then. I am still hearing the same things, and this is months – this is years later. In fact it was two years ago that the system was supposed to be implemented – the aided dispatch system. So when will the tender – I do not even know when it will actually start, much less that you will approve someone to do the work.

Kate FITZGERALD: The 2023–24 budget provided funding to Triple Zero Victoria to deliver a next-gen CAD system, and it was always intended to be a multiyear project. Since that time Triple Zero Victoria has appointed a service delivery partner. That is the partner that sits alongside them in order to be able to go to market to identify and then appoint a vendor, so a technical vendor to deliver the new platform. We are now very close to appointing that vendor, and we expect for that to be in the coming weeks – that we are able to announce the appointment of the vendor.

Nick McGOWAN: So before Christmas.

Kate FITZGERALD: That is the intention at this stage.

Nick McGOWAN: It all sounds like a wing and prayer. I have got to be honest with you; it does not sound great. Why has it taken so long for these commercial arrangements to be in place? What has been so complicated about it that Victoria could not get this in place months if not years ago?

Kate FITZGERALD: The current Triple Zero Victoria next-generation CAD program is on track and is on schedule, and once that vendor has been appointed the estimated expenditure for that program and the estimated completion date will become publicly available. Obviously we have not been able to make both the date and the quantum – the funding allocated to that project – available publicly at this stage because of the commercial arrangements, but as soon as we appoint the vendor we will be able to publicly report on the estimated completion date and on the estimated cost for the project, and as I said, the intention is for that to occur very shortly.

Nick McGOWAN: How many calls were made in that 2-hour period? Do we know?

Kate FITZGERALD: Sorry?

Nick McGOWAN: How many calls were taken in that 2-hour period?

Kate FITZGERALD: Triple Zero Victoria is undertaking that analysis at the moment, and the board will be briefed and government will be briefed on that as soon as that is available.

Nick McGOWAN: Can you advise the committee when you know the information? Surely you will know that in the next five days.

Kate FITZGERALD: I can definitely take that on notice. Triple Zero Victoria will advise the minister in the first instance.

Nick McGOWAN: That is fine, but this committee would like to know how many calls were received and how many calls in their assessment were actually unable to be responded to – those two things. Can you take that on notice?

Kate FITZGERALD: It is an important point to note that Triple Zero Victoria was able to receive all calls.

Nick McGOWAN: How can you be certain of that as you sit here right now?

Kate FITZGERALD: Because there was not an issue with the Triple Zero Victoria number itself. It was an unplanned outage on the CAD system, and the CAD system is what call takers and dispatchers use when you call 000.

Nick McGOWAN: Okay. So the figure we are looking for, then, is how many calls were received and taken with pen and paper, correct?

Kate FITZGERALD: Through their business continuity arrangements.

Nick McGOWAN: I do not know what that really means. That is just spin for pen and paper, right?

Kate FITZGERALD: It is actually a card system that they use, which is consistent with all other jurisdictions and their business continuity arrangements for Triple Zero services.

Nick McGOWAN: Okay. I might shift gear for a moment here, Secretary, to legal aid. How many Victorians who sought Victoria Legal Aid funding had their applications rejected in 2023–24?

Kate HOUGHTON: I do not think I have that figure with me. Marian Chapman, Deputy Secretary? No, we do not have it, but we can, if able, take that on notice and provide that information to you.

Nick McGOWAN: Thank you. That would be appreciated. If she is able to add anything too, she is welcome.

Kate HOUGHTON: Yes. Marian, do you want to come up? Thank you.

Marian CHAPMAN: Apologies, Mr McGowan; it is very hard to hear back there. Would you mind repeating the question?

Nick McGOWAN: The question was: how many Victorians who sought Victoria Legal Aid funding had their applications rejected in 2023–24?

Marian CHAPMAN: I do not have that information to hand, but I am certainly happy to take it on notice.

Nick McGOWAN: Okay. That would be good. Thank you. I noticed in the performance measures in the questionnaire we received, the target in terms of unique clients who accessed one or more Victoria Legal Aid services was 105,000. The actual performance was 82,606. That is a significant shortfall, some 21 per cent. What accounts for that shortfall?

Marian CHAPMAN: Thank you for the question. We have actually been reviewing with legal aid their performance measures. Their operating model has changed over time, and what they are now seeing is a greater extent of family violence early intervention services – things like pre-court engagement programs and summary crime focused help before court. They also do a range of client advocacy and support services. What that means

is the measures that they had before are not really fit for purpose and they are not picking up that change of model. So it is really a change in the early intervention approach and the mix of clients that they have, particularly in that family violence cohort. We are looking at those measures going forward to be more appropriate to the business that legal aid currently undertakes.

Nick McGOWAN: I appreciate the answer, but the explanation actually given in the questionnaire is, and I will read it to you:

The actual is lower than the target due to Victoria Legal Aid providing an increased number of non-legal and advocacy services.

Marian CHAPMAN: Correct, and those are the early intervention services that I referred to, so that earlier advocacy, earlier engagement service.

Nick McGOWAN: But surely their core work is to provide legal aid, not to be providing advocacy services. I mean, at its nub they are there to represent Victorians who cannot represent themselves.

Marian CHAPMAN: That is right, and part of that service is actually getting to people earlier, when their problems are easier to understand and they can actually often deal with that in a way that does not involve going to court. So that is the early intervention model.

Nick McGOWAN: But it seems like we are sacrificing the publicity for the purposes of actually serving those who need legal aid.

Marian CHAPMAN: I think the advocacy comment is not advocacy in a public sense, it is advocacy in the assistance of that individual and helping them to get the service that they need. Where that can be done in a way that assists that person to not go to court, that is done, and it also allows legal aid to prioritise some of the higher priority clients that really do need that legal advice so they will go through to a lawyer for advice, and that includes the family violence cohort.

Nick McGOWAN: So how can the department have any confidence that what they are asking you to do and what you are setting as a target to achieve is actually achieved going forward in terms of the number of Victorians that receive legal aid?

Marian CHAPMAN: As I mentioned, we are working closely with legal aid to look at their performance measures. We acknowledge, with them, that those measures are in relation to a business model that is a bit out of date, so that does need changing and that will go through the normal approval process for performance measures. So the business has evolved; the performance measures are just a little bit behind that business evolution.

Nick McGOWAN: I sort of get it, but I really do not, because if we had sat here 12 months ago and we had talked about your performance targets, you would have all sat here and assured me that your performance targets were spot on and they had had due consideration and gone through several processes and so on and so forth, but now some time later I am told that the problem is the business case and the complexity of the cases. I mean, none of this is new – none of this is a surprise – certainly not to practitioners who are out there in the field. So I just do not understand how it all seems like gobbledegook. I mean, that is all I am hearing so far this morning in terms of the words and the excuses. But I just do not know how we are servicing fewer Victorians when it comes to legal aid and where that money is going. That might be more an observation than a question, perhaps.

Commissioner, a quick question on PSOs: how many stations at the moment do we not have staffed by PSOs across the metropolitan network?

Shane PATTON: Well, we have not officially withdrawn from any of the railway stations, so if there are any you are suggesting that are unstaffed, I would like to hear that. We are still committed to the current model, and there will of course be occasions where there will be shortfalls due to sick leave or the like, or unplanned leave, but I have not instructed nor withdrawn from any of our normal modelling.

Nick McGOWAN: I wrote to the minister some weeks ago, because I was concerned that at Ringwood East now for some months there have been no PSOs. There is a PSO hub there, but there are no PSOs at Ringwood

East train station, and that has been the case now for months and months. Maybe you were not aware of it, but we have also gone through a spate of home invasions in that area. Whether they are related or not is another matter, but it is of grave concern that we continue not to have PSOs at Ringwood East train station.

Shane PATTON: Thanks, Mr McGowan. A couple of matters there: I have not been briefed that we have been withdrawn from any permanent rostering there, but I will certainly take that on notice and come back to you so that I can clarify that. Your comment about home invasions is not linked to railway stations at all. As you would be aware, PSOs remain on railway stations and in that immediate proximity, so they do not have any involvement with crime that is really external in residential areas.

Nick McGOWAN: We can engage in the conversation later; I suppose my concern was that there were certain individuals coming from other areas. If they know they can get off at the train station and it is not policed and there are no PSOs, they have got a thoroughfare right through to that area. That was my observation.

Shane PATTON: No, obviously crooks do use trains, and I do not disagree with you on that. But nonetheless if they are coming along the railway line, there are PSOs right along there – noting of course 6 pm to the last train – and it is about protecting and being a visible police presence and ensuring they are there for the commuters. But certainly, as I said, I have not been briefed on that, and I am not aware of any instruction to do that, so I will take that on notice and come back to you.

Nick McGOWAN: Thank you very much. I will just get back to legal aid for a moment. In respect of community legal education and information services, and that is really family violence, it has failed to reach its target as well. Is that correct? Am I right in saying that?

Marian CHAPMAN: Yes, that is correct.

Nick McGOWAN: Why is that?

Marian CHAPMAN: That is people experiencing family violence primarily being assisted through other legal services. Again, this is an example of that measure not quite being fit for purpose under the current operating model. People experiencing family violence are considered to be high-priority clients, and they are more likely to be put through to a lawyer for advice and assistance. It is less around that community legal education campaign and they are going to a lawyer for legal advice.

Nick McGOWAN: What about duty lawyer services? That excludes family violence related services. They have failed to meet the target by 16.3 per cent.

Marian CHAPMAN: That is correct; that excludes family violence. There are a range of factors there. I do not have the detailed breakdown with me, but I am happy to get it during the hearing.

Nick McGOWAN: If you could, please, or even after the hearing. There is no rush. We are here for some time. Grants of legal assistance provided – that again excludes family violence, and that is down by almost 16 per cent as well. Why is that?

Marian CHAPMAN: This is really due to demand drivers such as crime rates, lower than expected child protection applications and some legislative change, and again that service delivery mix has continued to evolve with the higher number of family violence related matters that legal aid is seeing.

Nick McGOWAN: Legal advice and minor assistance for clients, excluding again family violence, is down by – and I am sure this is not a typo – 42 per cent.

Marian CHAPMAN: Yes. The target was 41,347 and the actual for the financial year was 24,041. Again, that is connected to the previous measure of grants of legal assistance, so it is quite linked to demand drivers, including crime rates and lower than expected child protection applications.

Nick McGOWAN: But we have got one of the highest youth crime rates for more than a decade, I think from memory. I do not quite understand that explanation of how that figure could be out by in the order of magnitude of almost half, 50 per cent.

Marian CHAPMAN: That depends on whether or not a particular child has gone through the legal aid process. Not all children are represented by legal aid. It just picks up those children that do go through that process.

Nick McGOWAN: Is it correct that Victoria Legal Aid also failed to meet its client satisfaction target by almost 20 per cent?

Marian CHAPMAN: Yes, that is correct. There has, however, been an upward trend in survey results since 2022 relating to access, experience, resolution, legal capability, wellbeing and satisfaction.

Nick McGOWAN: I suppose what we are alluding to here is this is not a great report card. If this were your child at school, you would be quite concerned. You would be sitting down with the teachers and the principal. I would be. This is a C at best, maybe a D. Is someone, Secretary, in the department ringing an alarm bell and saying, 'Boys and girls, this is not good enough'?

Kate HOUGHTON: We continue to engage with VLA. Picking up a central point from Ms Chapman's evidence, the performance measures need to actually be fit for purpose to the services that VLA currently now provide, so pre-engagement to court and other advocacy services for that individual. I would see, in the work that we are doing with VLA, recommendations for amendment to the performance measures to get a better, accurate picture of the services that are delivered and funded by government.

Nick McGOWAN: I know, but to say that it is not fit for purpose – I am sure that we knew this 6, 12 months ago. We are now sitting here, and surely the department had eyes over that and understood that. There is a consistency in the figures and they are not good.

Kate HOUGHTON: Agreed. The performance measures are not meeting their targets. But also the targets are not fit for purpose, and we have been talking with VLA for a period of time.

Nick McGOWAN: Of course next year we will be asking the same questions about the targets you set and saying, 'Are they fit for purpose, or is this just another magic pudding exercise?'

Kate HOUGHTON: We can continue to provide you with evidence of the services that they are providing and how the targets actually match the service that they are providing.

Nick McGOWAN: Thank you. Page 130, Secretary, of the department's departmental questionnaire reports that \$230,000-odd was spent on a system review of court fees completed in December 2023, with the anticipated outcome being to inform future reform of court fees. I guess 'reform' means 'increase'. Who undertook that system review of the court fees?

Kate HOUGHTON: Correct me if I am wrong – Marian Chapman is the relevant deputy – but it was Deloitte that undertook the consultancy for the court fee reform.

Nick McGOWAN: Are you able to release a copy of that report to the committee?

Kate HOUGHTON: It is still providing advice into government, so it would be cabinet in confidence at this time.

Nick McGOWAN: So it has gone to cabinet or it has not gone to cabinet?

Kate HOUGHTON: It is a court fee reform, so it is over a number of elements of the fees for court. It continues to inform government over time. There will be an end date obviously of when we stop providing advice to government on court fee reform, but it is still active cabinet in confidence, informing cabinet of advice that we provide on top of the Deloitte report.

Nick McGOWAN: Did the review inform the decision to raise probate office fees by up to – again, this seems to be a typo, but I am getting used to Victoria – 650 per cent, which took effect this Monday?

Kate HOUGHTON: There are a number of elements of the probate fee advice that we provided into government, and the Deloitte report was part of that. There was also a regulatory impact statement, but the

650 per cent increase is one element of it, and there is context and a rationale for cost recovery to that particular high-end element of the court fee, which, Marian, you might want to add to.

Marian CHAPMAN: Sure.

Nick McGOWAN: I suppose the other question is: how much do you expect this new fee increase to actually raise?

Marian CHAPMAN: Thank you for the question. The fees for probate are stage 1 of the court fee review to which you refer, and so that Deloitte report looked at all court fees across courts and tribunals. One of the main objectives of the fee review and particularly the probate fee increase is cost recovery in the Supreme Court, and the regulatory impact statement that was published as part of the process –

Nick McGOWAN: I am going to run out of time. Do you mind taking on notice how much you anticipate that will raise, unless you have a figure there?

Marian CHAPMAN: The RIS said \$46.7 million if the fees are there for a full year. Given that they only came in on Monday, it will be a different figure to that. We can take on notice an updated projection.

Nick McGOWAN: That would be much appreciated. Thank you. I understand the probate office fees raised three times the running cost of the probate office before Monday's fees hike. Was that correct?

Marian CHAPMAN: The probate office fees do over-recover fees in the probate office, but the purpose of the fee review is actually for the Supreme Court's service delivery as a whole.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Chapman. We are going to Mr Galea.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Chair. Good morning, Secretary, commissioners and officials. Thank you for joining us. Secretary, I would like to start by talking about a topic that has been very important and relevant to this committee in particular over the last 12 months, and that is gambling reform. In particular I note that the 2023–24 budget papers have an output for \$74.5 million in services to prevent and reduce gambling-related harm, and I know that includes some funding towards the VGCCC. Can you please talk to me a little bit more about these outputs and what has been achieved in the budget period?

Kate HOUGHTON: Thank you for the question. It has been a very busy time in the gambling portfolio, and I will hand to Deputy Secretary Toby Hemming, who has led the team on the extensive work to prevent harms from gambling. Toby.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Mr Hemming.

Toby HEMMING: Thank you, Mr Galea. Just as background, the committee will be aware that in July last year the Victorian government announced a range of gambling reforms. They included mandatory closure periods for hotel and club gaming machine areas, also included mandatory carded play and mandatory precommitment on electronic gaming machines and also included quite a technical aspect, which was slowing the spin rates for EGMs and also reducing cash load-up minutes from \$1000 down to \$100. The first aspect of that reform, which was the mandatory closure periods, was introduced in August of this year, at the end of August this year. Under that particular change the gaming areas in clubs and hotels are required to be closed from 4 am to 10 am, so a 6-hour period, which is an increase from the previous 4-hour period, which could in fact be staggered. So there is now a mandatory across-the-board closure period in those areas.

There is now work underway, which the department has been focusing on through our gaming and liquor business unit in particular, to implement the reforms that were announced last year. I might just go through some of those for the committee's benefit. In relation to the reform in relation to carded play and precommitment in pubs and clubs, the government has decided, and it has been communicated to industry and others, that a phased approach to that implementation is going to be taken. Each phase – phases 1, 2 and 3 – will be preceded by testing and by a pilot. The readiness for the implementation of that phase will be confirmed, and that will be the green light for statewide rollout, assuming that the pilot is successful. This phased approach has a number of benefits. It will reduce, for example, the impact on gaming venues by requiring fewer changes to the existing technologies and the processes that are in place within each of those venues. It will also mean that the required technology can be developed slowly and tested ahead of a full

rollout. It will also enable patrons to get used to the new environment over time, which is really critical, and that will assist in the uptake of the reforms as well and ultimately have a benefit in terms of harm minimisation from gambling.

In terms of the actual phases, the pilot for phase 1 is planned for the middle of next year, which is 2025. Under phase 1, which we would expect to commence at the end of next year, all electronic gaming machines will require a YourPlay precommitment card before they can be used. That is either a registered card or a casual card, just as per the status quo. To coincide with the commencement of phase 1 patrons will not be able to load up more than \$100 in cash at any one time to play an EGM, and no new electronic gaming machines will have a spin rate faster than 3 seconds – another one of the reforms. In terms of the pilot, which will commence in the middle of next year, there is consultation underway and work underway within the department to determine who will be part of that pilot. That will take into account things such as venue locations, venue size and technology in place at the venues – those types of matters – and we are working very closely with industry and others to determine that. Phase 2 we will be expecting to commence at the end of 2026. Under phase 2 the card that is to be inserted into the electronic gaming machine has to be linked to a registered YourPlay precommitment account. That is the key difference in relation to phase 2. Casual and anonymous cards will not be able to be used. Under phase 2 as well, the player will be required to set a non-binding loss limit before they can use their card. As I said earlier, there will be a pilot that will precede that as well.

The final phase is the full implementation of these reforms. Under that phase, all players will be required to have a registered precommitment account, and they will be required to set a binding loss limit. The implementation approach, as I said, has taken into account concerns from industry, concerns from gambling harm groups, community groups and the like. There are a range of groups that have been established to ensure that government can be equipped with the knowledge it needs to ensure a smooth implementation of those reforms.

Michael GALEA: Thank you very much.

Danny O'BRIEN: Sorry, did you say when that last reform comes in?

Toby HEMMING: In 2027, Mr O'Brien.

Danny O'BRIEN: Thank you.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Mr Hemming. You mentioned amongst many of those initiatives the mandatory shutdown period from 4 am to 10 am. You would be aware PAEC conducted an inquiry into gambling harm and gambling regulation last year, and that was one of the major themes of feedback we received as well – very positive feedback about that change, not just for the hours of course but for the prohibition on staggering, which a number of venues currently do in the one area to ensure that people can effectively hop around from venue to venue and play continually. So that is very good to see in particular. Some more feedback that we received in that inquiry included on the phrase 'responsible gambling' and how it is a bit of a cop-out by industry because it puts the onus of responsible gambling or the onus of gambling harm onto the players, onto the people and, in many cases, the victims rather than the industry itself.

I note that the VRGF has been repealed through legislation as well this year. What effect has that had in facilitating these reforms and helping the government to achieve these outcomes?

Toby HEMMING: Thank you, Mr Galea. That is correct. The VRGF was abolished, and that was effective from the middle of this year. The functions of the VRGF nonetheless are continuing. They have been dispersed through to three separate entities. The department of justice has taken on the responsibility for the policy, research and evaluation functions. Approximately 18 staff from the foundation joined the department formally on the 1 July this year, so they are continuing to do that important work. The gambling harm campaign functions were transferred to the Victorian Gambling and Casino Control Commission, so they are continuing their work there. The critical prevention and program functions are now being delivered by the Department of Health. The government, at the time of the abolition of the foundation, highlighted what it considered to be the benefits that would flow from in particular sending the gambling harm prevention and program functions to the Department of Health, given the fact that the Department of Health also deals with some of the comorbidities that are associated with gambling harm – so for example, drug and alcohol issues, mental health issues and the like. So that work is being delivered out of the Department of Health.

Michael GALEA: Thank you very much, Mr Hemming, for that. That is very good to know. Secretary, if I can turn now to one of the many important statutory authorities that you have oversight of, and that is the Victorian SES, I note that the same budget papers include \$15 million of funding over the forward estimates for the fleet capability initiative. Can you please talk to me about that program and what is being delivered?

Kate HOUGHTON: Yes. Thank you. VICSES is a very key partner in the work that we do in emergency management, and we thank them very intensely each and every day. I will move to Kate Fitzgerald, who has responsibility for emergency management, to answer your question.

Kate FITZGERALD: Thanks, Secretary. Thanks, Mr Galea. The \$15.08 million was provided for the production of 35 replacement NextGen heavy rescue trucks as part of its fleet replacement program. This built on the \$8.9 million provided in the 2022–23 budget for 21 heavy rescue trucks and seven medium rescue trucks. A total of 56 heavy rescue trucks are now on track to commence production in 2025 and are expected to be completed for Victoria SES by December 2027. VICSES's heavy rescue trucks are primarily used in road crash rescue units but also provide general rescue, storm and flood capability from the same vehicle. This critical fleet replacement program helps mitigate against risks of failure incidents that take fleet offline. The initiative also helps ensure that VICSES's truck fleet is modern, safe and matched to the capability needs of each unit and their local community so that VICSES can achieve positive community safety outcomes. In 2023–24 VICSES forward-ordered cab chassis, which is the engine and cab of the vehicle, and onboard systems and components to mitigate the long lag times in imports and deliveries due to freight and quarantine issues being experienced globally. All cab chassis will be delivered by 31 December 2024, so very shortly, which is great news.

In 2023–24 the VICSES fleet working group designed the NextGen heavy rescue truck prototype, which is now in the final phase of planning. The prototype was recently around the state to various VICSES units for member feedback, and this feedback is now being collated and will be considered for final design changes. Each critical stage of the design has been through rigorous reviews, testing and analysis to ensure the resulting rescue trucks meet or exceed VICSES capability requirements and are compliant with various national and state regulations. These trucks can carry the full capability of specialist road rescue equipment, as outlined in the Victorian road crash rescue arrangements, along with varying levels of storm, flood and assisting agency capabilities.

If you would like, I am very happy to take you through some of the key features of the NextGen heavy rescue trucks –

Michael GALEA: That will be helpful, thank you, yes.

Kate FITZGERALD: which were designed specifically for VICSES, and they were informed by the VICSES working group. Some of those features include that the trucks feature all-round enhanced lighting with improved roller shutter locker lighting, overhead and internal locker LED lights and puddle lighting for the front and rear. Each cabin door has a puddle light illuminating the ground, intended to improve visibility during entry and exit, especially in low-light conditions. This enhancement directly addresses safety concerns for crew members moving in and out of the vehicle. Adequate lighting in critical areas, such as steps, helps personnel navigate effectively, reducing the likelihood of missteps or falls during an emergency when time and vision are crucial. The truck features an auto eject mains power inlet, which is a critical safety feature that automatically ejects the power lead if the truck is started while still plugged into the mains power. An anemometer has been fitted to the light mast, capable of monitoring wind speeds during operations. This is a really important improvement because it is critical for ensuring safety, especially in adverse weather conditions where high winds could impact operations, and we know that VICSES volunteers often operate in high-wind conditions. It includes external visual warning lights to alert personnel of high winds, enhancing situational awareness and safety during operations. A bespoke bull bar has been fitted with a 17,000-pound, or 7.7 tonne, winch, which is essential for drag-and-pull operations which VICSES are involved in, particularly in scenarios involving the moving or removing of trees, which is a common task in rescue operations. The winch is designed to match the existing capabilities of the medium rescue truck, ensuring consistency and compatibility across the fleet. This standardisation helps in training and operational procedures. In addition, there are now modern roller shutters with central locking, and key override has been installed to enhance the security and accessibility of trucks' lockers. In addition, the new shutters allow for improved sensors for the locker warning system and an additional strip light above the shutter to improve internal lighting.

There is also a welfare locker, which has a 65-litre upright fridge freezer and instant hot water for hot drinks. This is a standard on all builds we're now, ensuring that volunteers have access to food and hydration during extended operations. In addition, the chainsaw workbench helps with the cleaning and maintaining of chainsaws and tools on the go and a dedicated air fitting for an air blow gun has been added next to the slide-out workbench for easy access for that cleaning. The light mast has been updated and equipped with a directional robotic head, with four 24-volt, 100-watt LED lights with a combined output of 84,000 lumens. The light mast can extend a total of 5.4 metres in height and is controlled via a wired pendant remote, allowing the operator to tilt and turn the light masthead to where the light is needed. The locker stowage is organised with easily accessible equipment, which is crucial during a high-pressure rescue situation, when every second counts. This includes ergonomic drawer designs and tilt-down mechanisms to ensure that tools and equipment can be retrieved quickly and safely. They are some of the features.

To produce the 56 next-generation heavy rescue trucks, a builder's panel is being established by VICSES. This panel will provide greater flexibility in the changing volumes and is also expected to improve build times for the trucks, allowing VICSES to leverage builder production availability. This methodology and procurement model separates the design services from the build and production and is based on the level of complexity. The benefits of that approach are that the prototyping allows VICSES to get the design right before production and involve their volunteers in that design. VICSES also has full control over variations and is not restricted by how the builder prefers to build, so the design will dictate how the truck is built as specified. Importantly, VICSES will now own the design or the intellectual property and is able to update the design as required.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Ms Fitzgerald. Another related or semi-related item in the budget is in the wake of the 2022 flooding event in northern Victoria. I understand there has been \$23.6 million put towards the repair and refurbishment of the shared CFA and VICSES sites in both Rochester and Heathcote. Could you please talk to me about the status of those projects?

Kate FITZGERALD: Yes, I can. Following a 16-month land search period involving comprehensive site due diligence and site fit testing, land has now been purchased in Heathcote. The final negotiations are underway on a preferred site in Rochester, with contracts expected to be executed later this month. Concept plans for both new facilities are expected to be finalised this month as well, with town planning to commence following. The designs have been developed in consultation with VICSES and the CFA, so both agencies were involved in these new emergency hubs, and they include drive-through motor bays and ancillary sheds for each agency totalling seven motor bays and two sheds and large shared spaces such as a kitchen, toilets and a multipurpose training room. Each agency will have their own dedicated operations areas for offices, tea areas and turnouts along with their own motor bays for hazard-specific vehicles. Construction on those sites is expected to commence in mid to late 2025, with completion expected by mid to late 2026.

Michael GALEA: Thank you very much. I understand there is also just over \$26 million, almost \$27 million, towards another project for delivering the emergency services upgrades. What specific projects have been funded as part of that line item?

Kate FITZGERALD: In terms of the VICSES projects within this initiative, funding was allocated for new sectional folding doors for the VICSES Skye facility, a satellite location to the VICSES Frankston unit, which was completed in January 2024, this year, and operational shortly after. Funding was also allocated towards new facilities at Kilmore and Bannockburn. Land has been identified and bought for the VICSES Kilmore facility, with settlement occurring this year on 5 August 2024. Concept designs for a new four-bay motor room and training operations building have been approved for that site and an application is being progressed towards town planning. In relation to Bannockburn, land has been identified and a contract is in place for the VICSES Bannockburn facility, with settlement expected in late 2024. Concept designs for a new three-bay motor room with a training and operations building are nearing approval and will progress towards town planning in early 2025.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. Of course we cannot talk about SES without talking about the amazing volunteers. Especially in the last few years we have seen these volunteers turn out time and time again, whether it has been flooding or several major storms. I have had that in my region, in particular in the south-east suburbs. I do want to briefly call out and thank them for the work they have done, particularly in my region. We know that they do incredible, amazing work just about every day. Ms Fitzgerald, what other initiatives in this budget have gone to support SES volunteers in particular?

Kate FITZGERALD: Within the initiatives from the 2023–24 budget ‘Delivering emergency services upgrades’, seed funding was also included for land investigation and planning for a new VICSES Footscray facility. Over the past 16 months an extensive land search and onsite due diligence has occurred, and a preferred site has been determined in that community. Negotiations are underway with the landowner, the Department of Transport and Planning, in relation to purchasing the land. In addition, in 2023–24 VICSES also completed the \$16.9 million VICSES facilities and fleet maintenance and volunteer health and safety initiative, which was funded in the 2022–23 state budget. This initiative enabled VICSES to maintain its facilities, upgrade priority vehicles and help volunteers respond to floods, storms and other emergencies. Importantly, in February 2024 as part of this initiative VICSES launched the volunteer leadership development program, which is intended to offer high quality, evidence-based training on key people leadership skills.

In addition to this, VICSES also delivered online leadership training modules, facilitated training sessions on key management skills, and developed training calendars for 2024–25 including training in capabilities such as steep-angle rescue, rescue boat skills, road rescues, incident management and crew leadership – all really critical capabilities for our volunteers. More than 3000 member skills assessments were undertaken by VICSES in 2023–24 thanks to this funding, and that was in capabilities such as land-based swiftwater rescue, safety in storm and flood operations and crew member level 2 training. These are the technical skills needed for crew response to all of the emergencies that VICSES is responsible for, which includes storms, floods, landslides, earthquakes and tsunamis. Through this initiative six VICSES members were awarded level 3 accreditation across a range of incident roles.

Michael GALEA: Thank you very much.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Galea. We are going to go to Mr O’Brien.

Danny O’BRIEN: Thank you, Chair. Good morning, all. I am sorry, I am going to play a bit of musical chairs – could I get Ms Chapman back up to just finish those previous questions? Do not go too far though, Mr Hemming, because I suspect I will be getting you back. Ms Chapman, you were just answering a question – the probate fees currently recover about 300 per cent of the cost of administering probate. What will they be after the changes as of Monday?

Marian CHAPMAN: I cannot give you a percentage of recovering the probate office because that is not actually the purpose of the probate fee review. The purpose of the review is to look at the overall financial sustainability of the Supreme Court. So there are functions within the probate office that generate revenue, and then there are lots of functions in the court itself that do not, including criminal hearings.

Danny O’BRIEN: So will probate fees then going up dramatically be subsidising other areas for cost recovery?

Marian CHAPMAN: It assists the cost recovery of the court as a whole.

Danny O’BRIEN: Okay. It has been suggested it is over 1000 per cent now in cost recovery just on probate. Would that be roughly accurate?

Marian CHAPMAN: I could take your assessment of that, Mr O’Brien. I do not know the answer to that, because as I say, that was not the purpose.

Danny O’BRIEN: Okay. You mentioned that the review of probate fees was stage 1. What other court fees specifically are in the scope of stage 2?

Marian CHAPMAN: Stage 2 has not commenced yet, but that is all other court fees in Victorian courts and tribunals.

Danny O’BRIEN: Everything?

Marian CHAPMAN: Everything.

Danny O’BRIEN: Right. And that is also informed by the Deloitte review?

Marian CHAPMAN: Yes. The Deloitte review looked at the structure and the pricing model for all court and tribunal fees, and on the basis of that we looked at probate fees first. Then we will do the others.

Danny O'BRIEN: Given we have not seen the Deloitte review and cannot see it, apparently, can Victorians expect similar 650 per cent increases in other court fees across the courts?

Marian CHAPMAN: I am not able to say ahead of that work commencing, Mr O'Brien.

Danny O'BRIEN: Can you rule it out?

Marian CHAPMAN: I cannot rule anything in or out.

Danny O'BRIEN: Okay. Will stage 2 of the fee review also have public consultation?

Marian CHAPMAN: If there is a need to change regulations, yes, because that is a normal regulatory impact statement.

Danny O'BRIEN: Will there be a RIS process?

Marian CHAPMAN: There will be a RIS.

Danny O'BRIEN: Okay. Can I move to police now, and probably to the chief commissioner, I imagine. Page 19 the police annual report notes the WorkCover premium paid by police increased by \$87.3 million in just 12 months. Was this paid out of funds allocated to pay the 1000 operational FTE positions that are currently vacant?

Shane PATTON: Yes, we would have used funds from those vacancies to support that as well across the organisation.

Danny O'BRIEN: Page 42 of the questionnaire says that you needed a \$246 million Treasurer's advance to, and I quote, 'support Victoria Police's operations and resources'. Why did Victoria Police run out of money?

Shane PATTON: Well, for a number of years we have been trying to determine what is the appropriate budget level for us to fund our operations, and as you would appreciate with operations being right across a range of different things like increased public order responses and not the least being we have a number of vacancies, as you are well aware, we are having to use people on overtime for a range of many public order issues for sports activities and all of that at sporting events. So we were funded that amount to allow us to deliver budget.

Danny O'BRIEN: Just to be clear, the 1000 vacancies you are paid for, but obviously you are not paying for them?

Shane PATTON: Yes. We are funded for, I think, 17,020 police, and we are, I think, 1044 currently under that due to attrition. We utilised those funds that were funded for that to offset other costs such as increased WorkCover and a range of things.

Danny O'BRIEN: So if you had those vacancies filled, you would need more money in the budget.

Shane PATTON: Well, that is dependent on a range of initiatives that we have happening as well in the WorkCover field. In the member welfare field we have established a number of health and wellbeing hubs, which we are seeing some early advances in. We are utilising the funding from BlueHub. We have a range of internal initiatives, so we are hopefully addressing and starting to see some early positive signs in terms of that WorkCover, but if we did not address the WorkCover, it would impact substantially.

Danny O'BRIEN: Yes. How much has the government asked you to cut from the budget, and how does that impact pay rises being sought through the EBA?

Shane PATTON: I do not have a specific budget cut. I have been asked to deliver a budget-neutral outcome, and that is what I am trying to do.

Danny O'BRIEN: Is it possible to do that within the demands of the EBA negotiations and the budget you have been given?

Shane PATTON: I get the question about it, but it is not relevant to our current budget because if we are funded for a pillar 1 component of the wages, the current government wages policy is 3 per cent. If we reached an agreement, then government would fund that 3 per cent. It would not come from within my budget.

Danny O'BRIEN: Okay, but anything above the 3 per cent?

Shane PATTON: Well, above the 3 per cent I think there is capacity for a sign-on bonus or similar descriptor up to 0.5 per cent. There is a second tier in there which is the best practice employment commitment, which is pillar 2. There is a pillar 3 component for efficiencies, whereby if you are able to come up with efficiencies in conjunction working with the union, you can offset some increased costs. Then if we were in a position where we were able to do that, that would be required to come from within my budget.

Danny O'BRIEN: Right. So those – I did not actually catch all the figures –

Shane PATTON: Pillar 3 offsets, we will call them.

Danny O'BRIEN: Yes, but the three or four components you just mentioned there add up to, what, 4.5 per cent a year?

Shane PATTON: No. Percentages are vastly different. For instance, the government wages policy is 3 per cent. It is set at that. There is provision potentially to get an extra 0.5 per cent, and government would fund those. The second pillar is really about best practice employment commitments to do with rostering and the like. The third – I cannot put any percentage on that because you would have to be negotiating and determining between both parties, or between all parties, because there are some independent bargaining representatives, that you will agree to offsets, and if those offsets were agreed to, then you would balance those out.

Danny O'BRIEN: And some of those you would have to pay for because of the productivity gain, presumably.

Shane PATTON: If we did reach such an agreement on any of those matters, but as I said, we would not be building on top of them. It would be only if we were to gain offsets, where the union and the independent bargaining representatives would agree to offset those benefits through efficiencies.

Danny O'BRIEN: Have you been able to be clear with TPA what your constraints are?

Shane PATTON: Yes.

Danny O'BRIEN: Okay. You mentioned protests or public order. What is the cost of protest management for 2023–24 for Victoria Police?

Shane PATTON: I do not know whether I have got the actual number for the costs of protests with me. The reality is –

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

Shane PATTON: Well, I do not know. I will be able to tell you – I can tell you certainly for specific events. I mean, we had the ASEAN forum; that was costed at – I think we got \$3.5 million from the Commonwealth government towards that. It is not something that I would be able to come back to you on and say, 'This is how much we've spent on protests for the year.' We have a range of different protests that occur, and certainly since 7 October last year when we had the Hamas attack in Israel we have had ongoing protests; we can say how many people we have had utilised in those protests and how many protests, but –

Danny O'BRIEN: When you say 'How many people', do you mean officers?

Shane PATTON: Yes, how many officers.

Danny O'BRIEN: How many?

Shane PATTON: I think it is 480-odd protests, and I think it is somewhere up around 12,500 or whatever, but I will be able to tell you in one moment, if you would just bear with me.

It is now 486 protests, but up until the end of June it was 435 protests, and for what we call Operation Park, which is the deployment to the ongoing protests relevant to that conflict, we had deployed or used 11,880 police shifts over that journey. Since then up until 16 September that was up to 486 protests relating to that conflict, and 14,533 police shifts were deployed. As I said, that is in relation to that conflict alone.

Danny O'BRIEN: And those 14,500, are they literally taken off other duties? They are not sitting around waiting to be deployed to protests, presumably.

Shane PATTON: Some will be taken off other duties.

Danny O'BRIEN: What proportion?

Shane PATTON: I cannot give you the proportion. It will depend on the mix at the time. Some will come along from, if you like, stations; we will have some from our public order response teams. We have a large number from different areas, so it is not able to be, if you like, given a proportion and from where.

Danny O'BRIEN: But presumably, though, this must be a frustration to you that, at a time when we have got some serious criminal concerns happening in the community, you are taking 14,500 police off the beat to look after these protests. Is that fair to say?

Shane PATTON: I think the way I look at it is this is a really difficult time for the community. There is a lot of tension in the community in regard to social cohesion. Public order is an absolute responsibility of mine, and all of my police officers do a fantastic job in the way they manage and work with protest groups. So I view it as a responsibility, not a frustration. I view it as a responsibility for us to work with those protest groups and keep everyone as calm as we can, allow them to get their point over and make sure there is social order and that everyone respects each other's right to go about their business.

Danny O'BRIEN: Are you getting frustration, though, back from your officers because they are having to do this? I am not just talking about the Hamas protests but all protests, and that is the particularly high-profile one.

Shane PATTON: Do not get me wrong, if they are not at protests, they can be out deployed doing other things, absolutely, but it is an important aspect of policing. It always has been and always will be.

Danny O'BRIEN: Okay. Thank you. The annual report shows a 9.5 per cent increase in non-operational VPS employees, so unsworn employees, but only a nominal 1.36 per cent increase in sworn operational numbers. Is it a concern to you that at a time when we have got significant crime and significant protest activity that we have got a big increase in VPS numbers but not in actual police on the ground?

Shane PATTON: We have had an increase in VPS numbers for a range of different projects – our conducted energy device projects, tasers, and all those things. We have a lot of unsworn people or VPS there. But from my point of view, we are funded to get back to maximum attrition, which, as I said, I think is 17,020. The fact that we are under at the moment is not good. That is a source of frustration for me, I can tell you, Mr O'Brien, because we want more people in there. We are not alone, though. In jurisdictions right across Australia you see this as an issue, in terms of people being recruited into policing, and indeed across the world. My frustration is that we cannot get as many people in as we want. We continue to do what we can to get them in.

Danny O'BRIEN: Okay. Do you have a dollar figure of what those protest shifts would cost the taxpayer? Is that broken down at all?

Shane PATTON: No, I do not. It is not something that we would keep, because it would come down to, 'Well, what were the rank levels? What was this?'

Danny O'BRIEN: And they are already being paid anyway, yes. Could I move on to another issue? Yesterday we heard from the DTP Secretary that \$42.8 million had been reallocated or transferred from DTP to DJCS for speed cameras out of the road safety program. How many speed cameras will that buy?

Kate HOUGHTON: We do have the answer to that. Bill Kyriakopoulos is responsible for road safety in the department. We did pick up that conversation that you had with the secretary of DTP.

Danny O'BRIEN: I am glad to see you were listening.

Kate HOUGHTON: Yes, late at night too on the replay. Bill, do you want to just clarify that?

Danny O'BRIEN: It is charting on Netflix, guys.

Kate HOUGHTON: Thank you, Bill.

Bill KYRIAKOPOULOS: G'day. Thanks for the question. The reality is that that initiative was part of the original road safety action plan that was announced in 2019–20, and the allocation was in the 2020–21 budget. It was for 35 fixed camera sites and two point-to-point camera sites, and those projects are still ongoing. I think 29 are currently in play and listed on the Cameras Save Lives website. There are a couple more that we aim to deliver by the end of the year and into the new year by the middle of 2025.

Danny O'BRIEN: Right. Do you have data on what they would be expected to raise in terms of revenue?

Bill KYRIAKOPOULOS: Not specifically, no.

Danny O'BRIEN: Okay. Thank you. I am going to move on again – and it is probably for Ms Fitzgerald, I suspect – to a question on CFA stations and funding. You might have seen media coverage of my little station in Winnindoo, which got funding in the 2020 budget. They have now been told that they will not get their station until 2026. I have been told that the original budget for this station – it is a single fire truck – was \$800,000, and it is now going to be over \$2 million for a single-truck shed. Is that accurate?

Kate HOUGHTON: The responsible deputy for that is Corinne Cadilhac, who is in our Community Safety Building Authority and who has inherited the CFA builds. Corinne, do you want to talk to this particular station, thank you.

Corinne CADILHAC: Certainly. Thank you. The program was initially announced in 2020–21 for delivery by the CFA, and in September 2022 the government took the decision to consolidate all of the CFA infrastructure new builds into the Community Safety Building Authority. At that time BP4 was recalibrated to reflect a consolidation of all of those projects and programs. They were all significantly behind, so one of the first things that the building authority did was due diligence on each one of those sites.

Danny O'BRIEN: I am sorry, Deputy Secretary. I am going to run out of time. I just want to know whether that figure of \$800,000 to over \$2 million is correct for Winnindoo.

Corinne CADILHAC: We have developed with CFA, based on their specifications, the concept design, and it is with them for approval. As soon as it comes back from them having been approved, we will do the detailed specifications to do the detailed estimates to inform the pricing for that site.

Danny O'BRIEN: Would it be accurate to say that there have been two architects now involved in this single shed development, firstly with the CFA and now again with a different architect for the CSBA?

Corinne CADILHAC: I do not believe so. They had not actually begun the detailed design work on this particular site. We novated across every single engagement they had to the CSBA, so if there was one engaged on that site, it would have been novated across. I believe that we actually hired new architects for that site, who have then done that development work to inform the concept, which is now seeking feedback and approval through the CFA.

Danny O'BRIEN: Would it be accurate to say – this has not come from me; it has come from people in the CFA – that the costs of building stations have doubled since the CSBA was introduced in 2022?

Corinne CADILHAC: The costs of infrastructure have risen significantly since the time when these projects were funded and business cases presented to government. Some of them were initially considered up to seven years ago, five years ago, four years ago. Since then there has been hyperinflation in the market. We had COVID, which impacted supply chains and subcontractors and workforces.

Danny O'BRIEN: Can I cut to the number: do you have a square-metre figure for fire stations, for example, that you have each year on what it costs?

Corinne CADILHAC: I could provide that to you out of session, if that would be helpful.

Danny O'BRIEN: If you could, that would be great, because I do need to move on. I will maybe quickly get Mr Hemming back, if I could. Thank you, Mr Hemming, for the updates on the mandatory carded play. Were you aware that the Tasmanian government, which had also committed to introducing mandatory carded play, a few days ago moved away from that with the support of the Tasmanian Labor opposition and has basically said it is technically too difficult?

Toby HEMMING: No, I was not. No.

Danny O'BRIEN: Well, I have a question on notice to the minister that has been there for about six months on the technical specifications and how hard it is to do mandatory carded play. The fact that I still have not got an answer – is that suggestive that it is very, very difficult technically to link 27,000 machines across about 500 venues to a mandatory carded play system?

Toby HEMMING: Well, I cannot comment on the question to the minister, but as you are aware, mandatory carded play is now in place at Crown Casino. I appreciate that that is just the one site as opposed to more than 500 venues with 30,000 or so machines. The advice to the department is that there is no technical impediment to introducing it, but we are working very closely with technical experts through a technical reference group. We are working with industry as well. We are meeting with them really regularly and they are raising issues, and they are being dealt with. But at this stage we are not aware that there is any technical impediment to ultimately delivering the reforms.

Danny O'BRIEN: You mentioned Crown – can you confirm that the introduction of mandatory carded play there saw a 30 per cent reduction in turnover? And I do not need you to confirm it, but there were a thousand jobs lost from Crown as a result.

Toby HEMMING: I do not have a figure about the reduction in terms of turnover. I am aware that there were 1000 jobs lost. I saw comments by the then chair of Crown Melbourne in relation to that. I do not think they were attributed to the introduction of mandatory carded play, but I may be wrong.

Danny O'BRIEN: Okay. I am going to run out of time, but I might come back to it when I do. Thank you, Mr Hemming.

Toby HEMMING: Thanks, Mr O'Brien.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr O'Brien. We are going to go to Ms Kathage.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you, Chair, Secretary and officials. I want to start by asking some questions around women's safety. In last year's BP3 on page 69 there is a section around specialist family violence legal assistance at court. That talks about support that is provided to have cases resolved more quickly. Why is that drawn out as being something important to fund? What impact does that have on the victim- survivors? And what other supports are you wrapping around? Because I imagine it would be more than just that which would be helpful.

Kate HOUGHTON: Yes, Ms Chapman can talk to this in detail, and it goes to the point that Mr McGowan made in terms of trying to resolve issues before they get to court, because the trauma of victims in facing court with their alleged perpetrator is quite significant. As you know from the Royal Commission into Family Violence, we have invested billions of dollars in the state, so we work really carefully and collaboratively with the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing on women's safety and gender-based violence, and the legal aspect to that is led by our department in partnership obviously with VLA and the courts and other community legal services. Marian, do you want to talk in detail to the investment we have made, particularly on specialist legal courts?

Marian CHAPMAN: Sure. In the 2023–24 budget, there was \$77.1 million over four years to end family violence and sexual assault, and that is on page 40 of BP3. That included funding to support victim-survivors and Aboriginal-led sexual assault support services. In addition to that, there was \$22.83 million over four years

to deliver specialist family violence legal assistance at court, including for the continuation of a pre-court engagement program for two years, and on 30 May this year the government announced a package of 16 initiatives to address gender-based violence. All of this investment together is intended to strengthen women's safety and address family and sexual violence at every stage. There has been some subsequent additional funding in the 2024–25 budget, which is \$0.57 million to justice-prescribed multiagency assessment and management of agencies for tailored training to incorporate family violence, risk identification and assessment into their work with victim-survivors and adults and young people who use family violence.

Lauren KATHAGE: Is that MARAM?

Kate HOUGHTON: Yes, that is correct. It is MARAM.

Lauren KATHAGE: Is your department responsible for that framework risk assessment overall?

Marian CHAPMAN: Yes. I may defer to another of my colleagues for detailed questions on MARAM, but yes.

Lauren KATHAGE: Sure. Okay, great.

Kate HOUGHTON: Just on MARAM – sorry to interrupt – that partnership with DFFH is really important, but the training component for our workforce, particularly in youth justice and corrections, is essential, looking at risk assessment and then action from that. The actual implementation of MARAM, as opposed to building the framework, is critical to the work that we do.

Lauren KATHAGE: Okay, great. Secretary, in your presentation there was a very long list of legislation that has been worked on, and we know that family violence disproportionately affects women, so on the law reform side, how is your department contributing to improving safety for women?

Kate HOUGHTON: Yes. We have done, are continuing to do and will do in the future give advice to government on law reform and bringing Bills into the Parliament. Marian is the lead on courts, criminal and civil law, so she can talk to the law reform agenda.

Marian CHAPMAN: The package that I referred to earlier, which was the government announcement in May, includes reforms to family violence intervention orders, increased funding for legal assistance to support victim-survivors and a study on the suite of perpetrator interventions, but on top of that, the legislation that you referred to. There will be changes to the stalking offence that will be informed by the Victorian Law Reform Commission's stalking report, and also improvements to personal safety intervention orders. The intention is for legislation to be introduced next year, and that involves a lot of partnership between the department, the sector, Victoria Police and other key stakeholders.

Lauren KATHAGE: Is that stalking reform around the risk assessment or is that around –

Marian CHAPMAN: The stalking reform that I am referring to is actually the offence, so it will be the legislative reform, and the policy that underpins that.

Lauren KATHAGE: I believe that there was an updated risk assessment process that was introduced for police in relation to stalking.

Kate HOUGHTON: Yes. The chief commissioner might want to talk about the pilot – in pilot stage – for risk assessment for people allegedly stalking. Shane might want to talk to that.

Shane PATTON: Yes, sure. Thank you. We call it the SASH, which is screening and assessment for stalking and harassment. We identified that our family violence practitioners, those experts in that field – we have around 400 of them just focused on family violence – were and are experts in assessing risk, if you like. But stalking was also happening and is happening to women unrelated to family violence incidents. We researched around the world, if you like, and came up with a Dutch model, which we have introduced here, and had a pilot conducted here, which we are just finalising the evaluation for. What that does is it will give assessments for uniformed members, who would normally not have that expertise in assessing risk and threat to predominantly women. It will now be classified at different levels in that regard.

The pilot has been very successful for us in that it has given a real lot of skills to members to determine – the importance of it practically means they need to understand the threat to predominantly women and that it will not do to summons someone but you need to be taking further action. You need to be taking them before a magistrate to get them remanded and that type of thing. It is increasing the experience right across our organisation in terms of the ability to understand the risk, to assess the risk and to make women safer. We are really, really pleased with the outcomes of the pilot. It was used 180 times when responding to a stalking incident. It increased training for 424 police, frontline and specialist. It is currently being evaluated by the Centre for Forensic Behavioural Science at Swinburne University, and the evaluation should be completed by the end of this year. We see that as a real positive. If that is the case, it would be our intention then to try and roll that out, recognising that risk to women should not just be able to be assessed by specialists but by all of my organisation.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you. I represent the suburb of Mernda, so my community will be very happy to hear about those increased supports and skills for officers to deal with stalking behaviour. Ms Chapman, will the outcomes of that pilot inform the legislation?

Marian CHAPMAN: Yes. As in any legislation development, we look at pilots, we talk extensively to stakeholders, we talk extensively with Victoria Police, with their on-the-ground experience, we talk to our interstate colleagues. As the committee would be aware, gender-based violence is a significant issue being considered at the national level as well as the state level, so it is brought up at ministerial-level councils. The Standing Council of Attorneys-General considers it every time they meet, and the funding arrangements for national legal assistance, which are currently being negotiated with the Commonwealth, will also – those new funding arrangements – have a significant focus on women’s safety and gender-based violence.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you. You mentioned family violence intervention orders before. There is work with Family Safety Victoria on flexibility in the length of those.

Marian CHAPMAN: We are looking at the effectiveness of intervention orders, the duration, how they are served, so all of those issues are being considered in relation to the reforms that will be brought in in the legislation that I referred to earlier.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you. Just looking more broadly at legal assistance, there is a suite of programs that are listed in the budget papers around that same section, pages 83, 88 and 89. It is about \$13 million over two years. It is quite a mix of programs. Can you explain a bit about why these particular programs and what they are hoping to achieve?

Kate HOUGHTON: Yes. Marian can do the detail, but there is significant funding from the state government. We fund most of legal assistance funding, and the Commonwealth also assists with that. We are currently negotiating the new national agreement for that. These specific programs that the government has funded – Marian can talk to the specifics.

Marian CHAPMAN: Sure. Thank you for the question. Legal assistance services deliver critical and cost-effective early intervention and preventative help, particularly for disadvantaged and vulnerable Victorians. One of the very good examples that the committee might want to hear about are health justice partnerships, and what these do is bring legal help directly to people where they need it most, and they provide that early intervention service. Health justice partnerships bring health, legal and other services together to address complex problems for people. A partnership might include a lawyer in a health setting; that allows for easy warm referrals. It could include holistic, wraparound services. But the intention really is to allow for legal help to get to people at places that they ask for help.

What we know is that legal issues can often manifest as problems in other parts of people’s lives, and they do not necessarily recognise that their problem is a legal problem. The funding that government has provided for some of these legal assistance programs goes to health justice partnerships. They make it easier for people to get that legal help. Providing holistic, wraparound legal and health support can give a better outcome for people who are having legal challenges and avoids those issues escalating and becoming more complex and difficult to deal with. Then we know also there are downstream costs in the justice system if those issues become more complex and more embedded.

Lauren KATHAGE: Sorry, Ms Chapman, can you provide a concrete example of a situation where someone would benefit from something like that?

Marian CHAPMAN: Yes, absolutely. One of the successful partnerships that you might want to hear about in a health setting is Barwon Community Legal Service. They have the health-enhancing legal partnership model known as HELP. HELP lawyers work closely with hospitals and community health services to support patients who have intersecting health and legal issues. HELP lawyers have helped many people presenting for a health reason who have then had a legal issue identified, such as older people who are experiencing elder abuse who then present to hospital. In the 2023–24 financial year Barwon Community Legal Service delivered 216 services through its HELP program to people who may not otherwise have sought legal help or may not have known they had a legal issue.

Lauren KATHAGE: Okay, so it is recognising that people with legal issues might end up at a health service –

Marian CHAPMAN: That is right.

Lauren KATHAGE: and then providing the service they need there rather than expecting them to –

Marian CHAPMAN: That is right. It is taking the lawyer to them at places that they will seek help, often for other issues.

Lauren KATHAGE: Accessibility is important for access to legal help, so I am really interested in the VALS regional hub model. Can you give us an update on how that is rolling out?

Marian CHAPMAN: I will defer to my colleague Adrian Sculthorpe for that one.

Kate HOUGHTON: Adrian is our Deputy Secretary of Aboriginal Justice and leads a lot of our engagement with our Aboriginal Justice Caucus partners, and a key partner of that is VALS.

Adrian SCULTHORPE: Very much so. Thank you very much for the question. To start with, of course VALS are the largest provider of Aboriginal legal services in Victoria and the longest running dedicated Aboriginal legal service that we have, having celebrated their 40th anniversary just this year. The work that VALS leads includes providing the culturally appropriate legal assistance, education and representation to Aboriginal clients that I will talk about more directly in a second that crosses criminal, family and civil law, but also their key work is in more broadly promoting social justice and supporting our policy and legislative reforms. They have played a really key role in recent legislative amendments like those to the *Bail Act* and the development of the new *Youth Justice Act*. Their unique model, and why it is different, why it is effective and why it is culturally safe, includes not just qualified lawyers but also client service officers – CSOs, VALS calls them – and they are Aboriginal people who play a key role in bridging that gap between the legal system and the Victorian Aboriginal community, providing localised support and referrals, initial information and assistance with court attendance. VALS also – you were asking about family violence – maintains specialist family violence CSOs, and they provide that holistic, wraparound support to ensure clients receive appropriate and culturally safe legal advice, support and services, recognising that holistic, culturally informed legal services and networks are key to ensuring clients' needs are met and tackling Aboriginal over-representation. In terms of our overall partnership with VALS, the department funded them \$23.38 million in 2023–24, and that covered a range of things from family violence, legal services, Koori Courts initiatives to the Baggarook women's transitional housing program.

But most directly to your question about the VALS regional hubs, it is an exciting new initiative that the 2023–24 state budget provided \$7.08 million for over two years. The premise behind the regional hubs is to respond to significant unmet demand for culturally appropriate legal services in regional areas of Victoria that could not be met from VALS's previous Melbourne-centric model. So five regional hubs have been established – in Mildura, Bendigo, Morwell, Warrnambool and the western metropolitan region. As well as having a local presence in those areas, that employs 31 staff across those five locations.

It has really improved VALS's service reach into those areas, because prior to the implementation of that a lot of the services received by Aboriginal people in those areas from VALS was via the Melbourne-centric model or through some small regional teams. They did not have the capacity to meet demand. When I speak about

capacity to meet demand, there were two occasions – in June to September 2021 and in June 2022 – where VALS had to impose client service freezes, where they could not take on any new clients because of their inability to meet demand. Since the implementation of these regional hubs, there have been no service freezes by VALS. It has significantly improved the quality and amount of legal assistance available to Aboriginal Victorians living in regional areas, which is of course very important because the Victorian Aboriginal community is spread much more across regions than the non-Indigenous community, with 50 per cent of Victorian Aboriginal people living in regional areas.

Lauren KATHAGE: So how does that model work? Are they co-located with existing regional legal services? Is it a hub-and-spoke model or are they standalone services?

Adrian SCULTHORPE: They will be the hub-and-spoke model, that is VALS's ambition. Right now they are mainly focused on the five locations that they are in, but of course those locations are a lot closer to other regional locations, so it improves their ability to move there. Are they co-located in the office? I do not know that question; I can come back on notice. But the idea of working better with existing legal services and existing Aboriginal community organisations that are in all those areas is a real premise of that regional model, and of course to meet the holistic needs that clients living in those areas have.

Lauren KATHAGE: Have we heard much about outcomes yet?

Adrian SCULTHORPE: Over this period the primary objective was the establishment of the legal hubs, and they are established. Of course over a two-year period it takes time to recruit staff and secure local offices, but they have also commenced service delivery. The key figures I have there is to date 713 Aboriginal Victorians have received legal assistance through VALS out of those regional hubs. Now that they are operating at full or near full capacity there has been modelling work done that says the regional hubs are expected to support a further 4371 clients in 2025–26, increasing to 7443 clients in 2026–27.

Lauren KATHAGE: Does that seem primarily a sort of a preventative model or more a responsive –

Adrian SCULTHORPE: It is absolutely both. In each of those offices it is a multidisciplinary area where they have criminal, civil and family law, but they also undertake a range of prevention activities, including legal education to understand your rights and responsibilities but more widely in that as well.

Lauren KATHAGE: The Aboriginal Justice Forum – are there regional reps on that or how does that –

Adrian SCULTHORPE: Yes. The Aboriginal Justice Forum is our statewide body, our formal partner under the Aboriginal justice agreement with Aboriginal Victorians. It is comprised of service delivery organisations, like VALS and equivalents across health, housing, child protection – those type of areas – but it also has nine elected community members, each from one of the nine regions that we are in. So they sit at the Aboriginal Justice Forum, and we directly hear local Aboriginal community issues every time that we meet.

Lauren KATHAGE: Secretary, the Yoorrook Justice Commission and the department's presentation there – have there been any sort of immediate reflections or changes for the department based on the experience of giving evidence?

Kate HOUGHTON: Yes. It was an absolute privilege to be able to be a witness at the Yoorrook Justice Commission along with a lot of my colleagues in the room. I think the cultural competency and cultural training of our workforce was a key outcome from that.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Kathage. The committee is going to take a very short break before resuming consideration of the Department of Justice and Community Safety at 11:15 am. I declare this hearing adjourned.

The committee will now resume its consideration of the Department of Justice and Community Safety. We are going to Mr O'Brien.

Danny O'BRIEN: Just for a couple of questions again to Mr Hemming, sorry, if I could. I am very interested in the announcement earlier about the trials for mandatory carded play. I assume that will require legislation.

Toby HEMMING: Yes, it will.

Danny O'BRIEN: And that will be coming soon?

Toby HEMMING: It is a matter for the government, but yes, it would require legislation, Mr O'Brien.

Danny O'BRIEN: Yes, no worries. Can I ask, though, about some service level standards in the annual report?

Toby HEMMING: Yes.

Danny O'BRIEN: There are a number of different things there. Liquor inspections completed were 42 per cent shy of target in regional areas; they were 57 per cent shy of target in metropolitan areas. Calls to liquor regulator client services answered within 60 seconds was 20 per cent against a target of 80 per cent. Calls to the VGCCC answered within 60 seconds were 71 per cent versus a target of 80 per cent. And most particularly, liquor approvals licence permit applications and variations completed within a set time were 71 per cent versus a target of 85 per cent. Is this because of budget cuts within LCV and the VGCCC? Why are we not going even close to meeting the targets for service levels?

Toby HEMMING: Look, there are a range of factors, and they are particular to each of the organisations. If I just deal, for example, with inspections –

Danny O'BRIEN: Could I probably direct you to save a bit of time. One of my issues that I have raised a number of times in the past is liquor licence approvals, and I note liquor licensing client satisfaction is down to 78 per cent versus a target of 85 per cent, and I am continually getting complaints from people, 'Can you help with my licence application? It's been with LCV for four months, five months, whatever.' When is that going to improve?

Toby HEMMING: Well, there is improvement, that is right. In 2023–24 it was 71 per cent against a target of 85 per cent. The year to date for this current financial year we are sitting at 86.5 per cent in terms of meeting that target for the processing of licences.

Danny O'BRIEN: What are the current days taken to approve licences? Have you got the target? You might have the dates.

Toby HEMMING: The overall, which is an aggregate of permanent licences, temporary variations et cetera, is 41 days. So that is an average across each of those different licence types. In relation to new permanent liquor licences, that is sitting at around about 84 days at the moment, so it is just over, but the other licence categories are under that target of 77 days, which is the relevant measure.

Danny O'BRIEN: There is a lot more I could go to, but I am going to leave off to give Mrs McArthur a go.

Bev McARTHUR: Thank you. Could I call Ms Chapman, please? Ms Chapman, why did Triple Zero spend \$100,000 on a new logo, and how many trainee call takers would that have employed?

Marian CHAPMAN: Ms McArthur, that would be Kate Fitzgerald, sorry.

Bev McARTHUR: Sorry, Ms Chapman.

Marian CHAPMAN: No, all good.

Kate FITZGERALD: Thanks very much. I can take that question, thanks, Ms McArthur. As you are aware, a key part of the recent Ashton review that was undertaken into then ESTA was to establish a strong brand identity and to ensure that there was a positive association for employees and also the broader community in relation to the new agency, Triple Zero Victoria. So Triple Zero Victoria undertook a competitive tender process in line with government processes, and they awarded that contract to Studio Binocular.

Bev McARTHUR: How many trainees would it have employed, \$100,000?

Kate FITZGERALD: When considering the salary, uniform, training and other onboarding costs for call takers to successfully undertake their core role, the cost of the rebrand would not have funded one trainee call taker.

Bev McARTHUR: So it is irrelevant?

Kate FITZGERALD: Well, the work of the brand was not irrelevant to employees and the broader reform program underway at Triple Zero Victoria.

Bev McARTHUR: Okay. Secretary, perhaps you can direct me to who might answer about fire services levies?

Kate HOUGHTON: The fire services levy in terms of its architecture and quantum is the responsibility of the Department of Treasury and Finance.

Bev McARTHUR: Budget paper 5 2023–24, ‘Statement of Finances’, page 18, shows a budgeted \$847 million fire services property levy in 2023–24 and an estimate of \$871 million for 2024–25. Budget paper 5 2024–25 shows a budget of \$1033 million for the fire services property levy. Which agencies specifically are in receipt of the additional \$186 million raised by the fire services levy?

Kate HOUGHTON: We can only talk to what the current legislation provides for from the fire services levy in terms of FRV and CFA.

Bev McARTHUR: Exactly. What proportion did you get? How was that divvied up?

Kate FITZGERALD: At the moment we operate underneath the current legislative settings of the *Fire Services Property Levy Act 2012*, and underneath that Act the Treasury is able to allocate appropriations for CFA and FRV. It can fund up to 77.5 per cent of CFA’s agreed budget and up to 87.5 per cent of FRV’s agreed budget via the levy. So the way that the department receives that funding is via appropriation from the Department of Treasury and Finance, and then in line with the relevant legislation we appropriate that to CFA and FRV. We have not yet forecast the additional revenue that may be collated through the increase in the fire services property levy to CFA or FRV at this stage.

Bev McARTHUR: Can I just say, I have got farmers in my local area who are paying an extortionate rate compared to the town blocks, and four farmers paying basically a total of \$2 million. A truck costs half a million, and their truck is 32 years old. Can you understand that CFA volunteers who are paying an extortionate fire services levy are a bit peeved that they have got to use ancient equipment?

Kate FITZGERALD: I can understand and I am aware obviously of the frustration of rural landholders and also CFA volunteers in relation to the fire services property levy. I suppose I can only point to some of the investment the government has made in relation to fleet for both CFA and FRV and some of that investment that is being rolled out in relation to the delivery of new trucks.

Bev McARTHUR: Why should these firefighters who are paying extortionate amounts in a fire services levy have to volunteer to save us from bushfires but also endure ancient equipment? Why aren’t they prioritised?

Kate FITZGERALD: As the Secretary advised, the policy settings and the legislative settings for the levy are established by the Treasurer and the Department of Treasury and Finance, so the role of this department is to pass on the appropriation of that funding to CFA and FRV in line with the legislative arrangements.

Bev McARTHUR: Okay. So what dollar amount are the forward estimates in this budget discounts being applied to renewable energy installations?

Kate FITZGERALD: That would be a matter for the department of climate change I think.

Kate HOUGHTON: Yes, it would be Treasury or DEECA. but can you be more specific as to your question around renewables?

Bev McARTHUR: They are getting discounted in the levy, so what are the discounts being applied?

Kate HOUGHTON: That would be a question for the Department of Treasury and Finance.

Bev McARTHUR: All right. Let us go to the CFA fleet upgrades, Kate. Budget paper 4, 2023–24, page 95 shows the 2021–22 base capital fleet upgrade with an estimated expenditure of \$3.512 million to be completed in quarter 4, 2023–24, yet budget paper 4, 2024–25, page 93 shows that this still has not occurred and the estimated completion date is now quarter 4, 2024–25. How many fleet vehicles are still remaining to be delivered to brigades?

Kate FITZGERALD: As you mentioned, there have been budget announcements in previous budgets in relation to upgrades or replacements or new pumpers. In relation to the pumpers, a total of 25 were announced by the minister in June 2024. Ten were funded via CFA-based capital and 15 were funded in the 2024–25 state budget. Manufacturing in relation to those commenced in late 2023, and the first pumpers are due to be completed in mid-2025. The locations – which I am happy to take you through – for those first 10 pumpers have been announced, and the locations for the remaining 15 pumpers are yet to be determined, and that is a matter for the CFA to work through from a risk assessment perspective. In relation to the ultra heavy tankers, the CFA is currently rolling out 29 of those tankers. Thirteen have already been delivered to brigades and locations are now confirmed for the remaining 16, which I am also happy to take you through if that is required. We also have heavy tankers, and 48 been funded through state budgets in relation to those. Forty-two have now been delivered to brigades, and locations have been identified for the remaining six.

Bev McARTHUR: Perhaps, Ms Fitzgerald, we could just get all that detail on notice if that is possible.

Kate FITZGERALD: That is fine.

Bev McARTHUR: Thank you. Budget paper 4, 2023–24, page 95 lists the 2022–23 base capital fleet upgrade with an estimated expenditure of 9.832 million due to be completed by quarter 4, 2023–24. However, budget paper 4, 2024–25 shows that there is still a remaining \$3.31 million expenditure. Given that these projects are literally years late, are there any plans to expedite them and provide what is the genuine expected delivery date?

Kate FITZGERALD: Mrs McArthur, can I just confirm, is that in relation to CFA or FRV that you are referring to in the budget papers?

Bev McARTHUR: Well, the base capital fleet.

Kate FITZGERALD: The base capital fleet. I might need to take that on notice, because the way we approach fleet within each of the agencies is slightly different. I would say that across all of the emergency services agencies there is a key focus on the delivery of the fleet that government has invested in over the previous budgets. As I have outlined previously, VICSES and also CFA and FRV are well progressed. There have been delays to fleet. Some of those are due to legacy COVID impacts, but also more recently, probably impacts in relation to international trade and shipping. So we are seeing delays in our fleet as a result of broader international issues.

Bev McARTHUR: Well, I am glad you have mentioned COVID, because let us go to that. Why is FRV still persisting with vaccine mandates for firefighters?

Kate FITZGERALD: Yes, I can speak to that, Mrs McArthur. FRV is currently consulting with its people and also industrial partners about a proposal to lift the requirement for all employees to be vaccinated against COVID-19. As you are aware, one of the key factors of FRV's position was consistency with the health sector, and that was because of FRV's key role in delivering emergency medical response. On 4 October of this year the Department of Health Secretary's directions mandating COVID-19 vaccination for healthcare workers was revoked and FRV's executive leadership team then determined it was an appropriate time to review their COVID vaccination requirements. They are in the process of consulting on this proposed change and have commenced this process now and they are hoping that it will be a collaborative process obviously and be completed within a reasonable timeframe.

Bev McARTHUR: How many firefighters are currently unable to work due to these vaccine mandates?

Kate FITZGERALD: The current number of employees that we are aware of that are currently subject to the COVID-19 vaccination requirement within Fire Rescue Victoria is 18.

Bev McARTHUR: Eighteen, not 39?

Kate FITZGERALD: No, 18 is the most recent information I have.

Bev McARTHUR: Can you confirm whether the process of returning these firefighters has been delayed or obstructed by union influences?

Kate FITZGERALD: I can say that the requirement for FRV to review its vaccination policy is subject to the consult-and-agree requirements underneath its industrial agreement, FRV's operational agreement, and so it is undertaking that process as required by its EBA.

Bev McARTHUR: So it is due to Peter Marshall and his union leadership?

Kate FITZGERALD: I can only just restate what I have said, which is that FRV is complying with its consult-and-agree requirements in relation to a review of the vaccination requirement.

Bev McARTHUR: Well, have you on behalf of government intervened to address these delays to ensure that FRV can fulfil its obligations to the community and so that all these firefighters can be operational?

Kate FITZGERALD: FRV obviously is a statutory entity within the department of justice portfolio; however, it is responsible for setting its own policies, and it is responsible for undertaking consultation with its industrial partners. So it has the lead in relation to that at this stage, Mrs McArthur.

Bev McARTHUR: It is a bit rich. The rest of the world do not have mandates any longer, nowhere else in Australia has them and no other group has them – not even in the health sector – but in FRV we have a vaccine mandate.

Kate FITZGERALD: Following the change in the health directions, that is why the fire services commissioner took this to his leadership team, and since that time they have been undertaking their consultation requirements to review their vaccination policy.

Bev McARTHUR: Secretary, the number of operational CFA volunteers has dropped by over 6500, or 18.6 per cent, and in the same period the population has increased by around 15 per cent. The CFA report shows that the number has fallen consistently over the last decade from 38,335 in 2014 to 28,785 in 2023. Why is the government failing and why is your department failing to meet the volunteer targets? What is the reason why you have had this extraordinary drop-off in volunteers?

Kate HOUGHTON: Thank you for the question. Kate Fitzgerald can go into detail, but we work exceptionally hard with the CFA and our other volunteer agencies – Life Saving Victoria and VICSES – to continue to champion volunteers. Kate, do you want to go to the specific initiatives the CFA are undertaking to increase their volunteer rate?

Kate FITZGERALD: Yes. Thanks. That includes specific initiatives. CFA's most recent one was Give Us a Hand, a volunteer recruitment campaign which was launched in May 2023 and was followed by a second campaign from mid-May of this year to July of this year. As a result of both campaigns, CFA received 3412 new member applications. Those applications are in varying stages of the registration process. In relation to VICSES, during 2023–24 it received over 2000 new member applications. We often see an increase in interest in volunteering either following major emergencies or when specific campaigns are delivered. I think it is important to note in relation to volunteering participation that we are seeing a similar trend nationally, and arguably internationally, in relation to volunteer participation in emergency services. I know that our counterparts from other states and territories are also seeing a steady decline in their volunteer numbers. But I think it is important to note that despite not meeting the targets, both CFA and VICSES maintain that they have sufficient service delivery capability, and neither agency has fully expended its volunteer cohort at any one time. The assessment of the agencies at this stage is that while they continue to try to increase their volunteer numbers their current numbers are sufficient in order to be able to meet their required commitments.

Bev McARTHUR: Can you tell us what the current wait time is for CFA trucks requiring maintenance?

Kate FITZGERALD: For CFA trucks?

Bev McARTHUR: Yes. And while you are searching for that, how many are currently out of service awaiting maintenance?

Kate FITZGERALD: I do not have details, Ms McArthur, so I am happy to take that on notice about the current maintenance times for CFA fleet and also the current number of fleet that are in maintenance. I would say that that is quite a dynamic number, because we do see obviously (a) they have a maintenance schedule, so that is a planned maintenance schedule for their fleet, but then they also obviously have unplanned maintenance as well where an issue may arise during those regular maintenance schedules, so we will review that and provide the information as best as we are able to.

Bev McARTHUR: Okay, that would be very helpful. Given the number of drop-offs in CFA volunteers, are especially rural Victorians' lives being put at risk because of this lack of firefighting capacity?

Kate FITZGERALD: Can you just repeat that question, please, Ms McArthur?

Bev McARTHUR: Given the drop-off in CFA volunteers – 10,000 over the last decade – are Victorians' lives being put at risk because of this drop-off in the volunteer brigades?

Kate FITZGERALD: I would just refer you to my previous answer, which is for both CFA and VICSES, while they continue to actively prioritise the recruitment of new volunteers, they also are focused on retaining current volunteers, obviously. Neither agency has exceeded or totally required its full volunteer capability at any one point. The advice that we have received from both CFA and VICSES is that they maintain sufficient volunteer capacity to be able to meet their current requirements.

Bev McARTHUR: How much of the increased fire services property levy is going to recruiting new CFA volunteers?

Kate FITZGERALD: As I have said before, the levy is not appropriated based on programs, it is based on a percentage of their agreed budget with government. They are the policy settings we work under at the moment.

Bev McARTHUR: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mrs McArthur. We are going to go straight to Mr Tak.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you, Chair. Secretary, through you, if I can go back to Liquor Control Victoria, Mr O'Brien already touched a little bit on client satisfaction, which was slightly below the target of 85 per cent. What steps has LCV taken to improve service delivery?

Kate HOUGHTON: Thank you for the question. Toby Hemming can talk to the client satisfaction for Liquor Control Victoria status and improvements made. Thanks, Toby.

Toby HEMMING: Thank you, Mr Tak. Just for background, LCV regulates around 24,000 liquor licences in Victoria, so that is everything from pubs, hotels, restaurants, cafes, major events, nightclubs and the like. As part of its service it also, as Mr O'Brien mentioned earlier, undertakes a survey of licensees annually to understand levels of satisfaction or otherwise in relation to the services that it provides. Also, as mentioned earlier, that satisfaction rating for the 2023–24 period was 78 per cent, which was below the target of 85 per cent. The particular areas where feedback was provided were in relation to that tricky area of liquor licence processing times, clearer communications and also shorter wait times in terms of people who contact LCV either by phone or via email.

LCV has undertaken a range of efforts to try and improve, particularly over the last several months, on the back of those results. A key part of that has been in relation to recruiting. There have been recruiting challenges which have now largely been overcome, and at this point Liquor Control Victoria has a staff of around 100, which is the highest number of staff it has ever had. There are a range of recruitments underway as well in relation to its licensing area and in relation to compliance, education and legal as well. So, for example, the licensing team has in the order of 54 or so people working there and then the compliance team has 45 or so based in Melbourne and Ararat and also in Sale. So as a result of the increased capacity particularly in the licensing team, and despite an increase in the volume of liquor licence applications since July of this year, the

licensing decisions have been made on average 27 days faster than they were in 2023–24. It is 41 days compared to 68 days. The speed of liquor licence decision-making has been a major factor in the satisfaction score in the past, and so we are hoping to see an improvement, assuming that those results continue.

Another factor, as I said, in relation to the survey score has been around the length of time that people wait in order to get through when they are on the telephone. That has been an issue, and we are seeing some improvements already and hope to see some further improvements as we get more people into the client services team. We are looking to improve that by putting more useful information on the LCV website, essentially trying to head off some of the inquiries that would be coming into the organisation by providing some plain English, practical, useful information on the website, which can help answer some of the common questions that people contact LCV about.

Just to put things in perspective, just between July and October of this year – so four months or thereabouts – the team received about 15,000 telephone calls, which is a huge volume, and so that just underscores the importance of making sure that there is really useful information available on the website so that lots of people do not have to actually go to the trouble of making a telephone call. They can have that information handy already.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you. I also understand that LCV has also implemented digital forms for its licensing renewal. Could you also outline why these modernisations are important?

Toby HEMMING: Yes, thank you. The digital renewal forms, I think you were referring to – there are two aspects to that, I am sorry. There are digital forms, which have been implemented in conjunction with Service Victoria. At the moment there is something in the order of 20 slightly legalistic paper forms which licence applicants are required to complete. The future clearly is around digital forms. It has benefits in terms of the user experience. It has benefits in terms of ensuring that only complete applications can be submitted, which has a benefit flowing on from that of helping applicants in terms of the speed of the processing of their forms. One digital form has been created so far with Service Victoria, and there is a plan between now and the middle of next year to create another 10 or 11 digital forms. One of the other benefits of digital forms is that at the time the form is completed applicants are asked to turn their mind to the harm minimisation measures that they would take in respect of their venues. That assists the regulator when it comes to compliance and enforcement activity, and it also focuses the mind of the applicant as well in terms of the things that they would do within their particular venue to reduce the harmful effects of liquor.

Meng Heang TAK: I will come back to the harmful effect. Would you be able to tell the committee the time saved from moving from the actual physical form to the digital form?

Toby HEMMING: Yes. Essentially, if I use the renewal, for example, which is another initiative that has been completed in conjunction with Service Victoria, I think it now takes on average 60 seconds for someone to complete their renewal. Previously applicants would be required to wait to receive an invoice in the mail or by email. They now can log in to the relevant portal at any time just with their liquor licence application number and they can complete the renewal process, as I said, on average, in less than a minute I think it is, so it is a huge time saving. The digital forms as well – the one digital form that has been created so far is saving a significant amount of time. One of the issues with the old paper-based forms is that people often would not fully complete the form, so incomplete forms would be provided to the regulator, which would then mean there was a backwards and forwards process with the applicant, which would slow down the processing of the application. As I said earlier in relation to the digital form, the form can only be submitted once all of the information is complete, which obviously benefits the applicant in terms of the time that is required to process it.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you. What changes have LCV implemented to streamline the regulatory approach?

Toby HEMMING: They have taken an approach which I guess you could describe as root and branch. It is still a relatively new organisation, but they are making some really significant progress, whether that is in terms of people – and when I say people, that is around training and development and recruitment – or whether it is around processes, so internal processes or systems. But they are also fundamentally moving from being a fairly reactive compliance-based organisation to being an organisation that is much more focused on addressing risk

where they see risk being most present rather than just going through a box-ticking exercise with applicants. Among other things, for example, as I said, they are going through a digitisation process around their forms. They are doing some preliminary work at the moment as well to actually streamline a whole lot of their internal processes. That will require some funding in order to transform the IT, meaning that it will be much less paper based and more efficient. They have also been doing work to streamline the non-digital side of their application processing to improve the experience and the speed with which they are dealing with licence applications.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you. You also touched a little bit on harm minimisation when it comes to decisions. Can you tell us: how is the LCV's focus on harm minimisation informing their decisions?

Toby HEMMING: Harm minimisation underpins pretty much everything that LCV does. That means that their focus is on things such as harm to minors, harm to vulnerable people and communities, family violence or just the antisocial behaviour that flows from inappropriate alcohol consumption when it comes to injuries and property damage and the like. The compliance team, for example, is particularly focusing its efforts on the activities which result in very high risk of harm. That means that they are tackling the high-risk venues at the high-risk times and in the high-risk locations, and that is in contrast to what they might have done in the past where it was around just checking in on all licensees and all venues. That means late-night clubs, for example, are going to receive a lot more attention than just a quiet suburban cafe or bar.

They are also undertaking inspections right across the state, so they are spending time in regional Victoria. They are particularly attending events and festivals where the risk of harm is heightened. In terms of compliance activity, in the 2023–24 period LCV issued in the order of 236 infringement notices against licensees for breaches of the law, and that included things such as supplying liquor to intoxicated people, supplying liquor to minors, permitting minors to be on licensed premises, selling liquor without a licence and breaches of licence conditions. That figure of 236 infringement notices represents an 80 per cent increase on the number of infringements from the previous financial year. There were significant fines that were levied in the order of \$300,000 or so, which again was an increase on the previous year.

The commission itself, as distinct from Liquor Control Victoria, took really strong action in the relevant period in respect of certain licences, for example, in relation to advertising and promotions that it deemed appealed to minors or that were sexist or degrading or which conflated alcohol and drug use. Recently, for example, we issued a \$20,000 fine in relation to a late-night venue in Prahran for breaches of the law. You may have also seen a decision recently to reject a liquor licence application from a large packaged-liquor outlet which was proposing to establish an outlet in Daylesford, and that particular decision was made on the basis that granting the licence could pose a public risk and have adverse social impacts on that regional town as well. There is a harm minimisation focus at all levels of the organisation and in relation to all of its activities.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you, Mr Hemming. Moving on to employment in prisons, Secretary, we know how important – and especially difficult – getting a stable job can be for someone leaving prison to reduce the risk of reoffending. The 'Department Performance Statement' on page 103 shows that 92.9 per cent of eligible prisoners are engaged in employment in prisons. Can you explain what this employment is for people in custody?

Kate HOUGHTON: Yes. Thank you. It is a really important part of the structured day for a lot of the people that we care for in our prison system. The Acting Commissioner of Corrections Mel Westin can talk to that in detail. Thank you.

Melissa WESTIN: Thank you, Mr Tak. As you noted, employment in prisons is a really critical part of a prison's operating environment, but education and employment are the key reintegration domain and an important part of a person's rehabilitation and then leads on to community safety impacts. We know and there is strong evidence with research indicating that 60 to 70 per cent of people who reoffend are unemployed at the time that they reoffend. Since the state budget investment announcement in 2022–23 to establish employment hubs in prisons, there has been significant work to link what someone learns in the classroom within a prison to the skills that they learn whilst working in prison jobs, leading to meaningful post-release employment.

As you will see in the BP3 measures, Victoria has always had one of the highest engagement rates of people in education and work whilst in prison, and now dedicated employment specialists are working with people in prison to help get them job-ready and apply for jobs and engage them in employment supports as well. The

inside-to-outside jobs strategy is getting really great results. We are really proud of that particular program, with 481 people in employment following their release from prison and a further 926 people leaving prison with employment supports in place. Furthermore, of those that are now working in the community only 9 per cent have returned to prison over the last 22 months, which is really quite significant when you compare this to the Victorian recidivism rate, which is 39 per cent. We are also really proud to note that our inside-to-outside jobs program won the international award at the International Corrections and Prisons Association conference just a few months ago for reducing reoffending, up against nominees from more than 70 countries around the world.

Victoria historically has had and continues to have high engagement rates in education and employment whilst in prison, and in fact currently we have the highest rates compared to other jurisdictions in the country. Prison industries involve work contracted from outside the prison and through service-type industries within prison, and employment in a prison emphasises developing work habits and skills that will help a person to gain employment when they are released. People in prison often undertake vocational training programs with our TAFE providers which are relevant to their prison work and then gain qualifications that are recognised in the community relevant to the areas that they are working within. The range of industries offered in prisons varies from prison to prison, but common examples include things like metal fabrication, timber products, agriculture and horticulture programs, and some people in prison work within facility services, such as things like kitchens and laundries and cleaning and maintenance and gardening within the facilities themselves. Where possible the types of industries provided reflect market trends in industry needs so that we can ensure that there are real job opportunities for people when they move out into the community.

In terms of the employment pathways function that is provided by Corrections Victoria, we have expanded that, and the delivery of employment services and sustainable employment outcomes for people living in prison have also grown. Services are now delivered through onsite employment hubs across 10 of our prison locations, and since the establishment of the new employment hubs in December 2022 we have placed 339 people in sustainable employment following their release from prison with, as I mentioned earlier, a further 926 people exiting prison having been registered with specialist prerelease state and Commonwealth employment service agencies for post-release job supports.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you. Can you explain some of the partnerships that DJCS has in place with employers and how they are working to assist people in custody to get jobs on release?

Melissa WESTIN: Certainly. We do have a wide range of partnerships with a range of state- and federal-funded partners. We have also got partnerships with employers who are willing to give people a second chance after they leave custody. These include large tier 1 civil construction businesses as well as small businesses and community organisations. We also leverage off the Victorian social procurement framework to require businesses that we contract with for services to our correctional environments and also community organisations to employ people with lived experience who have had contact with the justice system. As I mentioned, there are also partnerships with state and federally funded employment support services, organisations such as WISE, the Jesuit Social Services, Vacro, Wanyaari and The Power in You, who partner with the Department of Justice and Community Safety to provide job readiness and employment supports for people leaving prison.

Mathew HILAKARI: I am happy to continue on. I am just hoping you could outline some of the challenges of people in prison in gaining education or job training. What are those challenges? Is it to do with prison sentences and that sort of timing, or what other challenges are there?

Melissa WESTIN: Certainly I think the challenges are more so in relation to when they are released into the community and finding employers in the community that are willing to give people an opportunity. In terms of challenges within the corrections environment we are well established to assess people upon entry into custody, so we provide, in partnership with our TAFE providers, a range of vocational assessments and language learning and numeracy assessments when they are coming into custody so that we can ensure that they are right fit and right placed into the right sorts of education programs and then employment programs within prison that will enable them to get the best opportunity of employment once they go back out to the community.

Mathew HILAKARI: That is some really wonderful results that you are getting on recidivism rates of people who have been involved in those employment programs. What is the cost per person going through those employment programs?

Melissa WESTIN: I would have to take that on notice in terms of the cost per person involved in those particular employment programs.

Mathew HILAKARI: Do you have the overall costs and the number of people who have participated in the programs?

Melissa WESTIN: Just give me a moment. Over the 2023–24 financial year we have got \$2.97 million allocated towards the employment hubs within prisons.

Mathew HILAKARI: Do you know how many people participated? Was it just the 481 and 926 that you mentioned, so about 1400?

Melissa WESTIN: Yes, that is correct.

Mathew HILAKARI: And what are we seeing as the cost per day for prisoners at the moment? I am happy if it is a different timeframe as well, of course, if that is the information that you have in front of you.

Melissa WESTIN: Just give me a moment. I do not have the 2023–24 figures in front of me, as the report on government services for 2023–24 has not been released yet.

Mathew HILAKARI: That is okay. It usually comes just a little bit later than now. I am looking forward to that coming through, but it does strike me that there is certainly a good value-for-money proposition related to the recidivism rate versus the cost of training and employment programs in prison, so thank you.

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

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Chair. Good morning. I would just like to start with some questions following media reporting that took place from the Land Forces expo. Can you confirm what the liquid irritant was that was alleged to have been thrown during the Land Forces protests?

Shane PATTON: No. I am unaware what the liquid irritant was. It was a light acid-based substance, but I do not know the actual irritant, no.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. What process do you use for analysing these substances and ascertaining their composition, or their pH level in this instance?

Shane PATTON: Well, obviously if we were able to seize and get the substance in its raw form so that we could take it for analysis, we would. We would send it to our forensics services area and analyse it. I am not aware of any actual seizure occurring in that way. We only are aware of the sort of irritant acidic-based type scenario that we had because of members – police officers who were working there – having rashes and reactions, reporting burning substances, and also reaction from police horses. So I am not sure that we will ever get to the bottom of what the actual substance was, but nonetheless there was medical advice provided at the time in relation to how to treat it, but I do not have those details, and I do not think we have – well, I have not been advised of a seizure of any sample that would allow us to analyse exactly what it was.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Right. So, just to make sure I have understood, there was not a broader analysis undertaken of the substance in question?

Shane PATTON: No, that is not what I said. We did not seize the substance to allow it to be analysed. The reason we knew that there was an irritant or acidic-based substance being used is because of the reaction from the police horses and the impact on police officers. We were not in a position where we had the substance to get it analysed.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: And the acidity of the substance, was that deemed to be low level but still sufficient for the symptoms you are describing?

Shane PATTON: Yes. It was a low-level thing.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Could it have been bubble detergent?

Shane PATTON: I am not a scientist; I do not know what it was. All I know is protesters were throwing and using irritants against my police officers and against police horses during a demonstration.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. I might move on to the visible presence of police in the community. Can you confirm: will police be marching in uniform at the upcoming Midsumma Pride March?

Shane PATTON: Oh, look, I hope so. We are very proud to do so. We have for over 20 years. It is our intention to do so, but we will be guided by the organiser of the Midsumma Festival. If they want us back, we want to come back. We think it is really important to show our representation for our LGBTIQ+ employees, to support them but also to show our support and solidarity with the community as a whole. Our relations – you know, they have had ups and downs over the journey, but we have come a really long way, and we continue to want to support that community and show our solidarity with them. So it is my intention to come back. It is up to the organisers of course.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: On the uniform itself, does the department acknowledge that seeing a large number of police officers in uniform at LGBTIQ+ events can be unsettling and painful for many community members?

Shane PATTON: I cannot speak for community members. All I can say is we do everything we can to work with that community. We are not marching with firearms on. We are not marching with any operational safety tactical equipment on the contingent is marching. What we are doing is we are walking down Fitzroy Street waving the LGBTIQ+ rainbow flag. We are engaging. We are trying to show we are representative and are part of society. We really love the day. We stop outside the Prince of Wales and wave, and everyone is having a great time. Unfortunately, if some members of the community are impacted by that because of past practices, then that is not a good thing, and we do not intend it to mean or cause any harm. We are trying to ensure our relations are great and continue to grow. That is why we are guided by the organisers.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Have there been any internal discussions within the department about police attending events without the uniform, given these concerns in the community?

Shane PATTON: I have not been asked about that. It would seem odd because the reason we are in uniform to go there is to show that Victoria Police as an organisation has moved forward and is much more encompassing of community – all different cohorts and groups. To turn up and walk along in my jeans and T-shirt I do not think would cut it. It would not be showing that we as an organisation are here and recognise past harms. We recognise past conduct, but we have to look forward to the future. We never say never to anything, but that would be a difficulty for me – parading without being in uniform – because it would not be representative of the organisation and the organisation we are now.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Just moving on to pill testing, can you give the community your assurance that Victoria Police members will give the drug-checking services in this trial a wide berth and will not stop and search any clients of this service as they enter or exit?

Shane PATTON: No, I cannot. This is a health-led approach. There is no role for Victoria Police in the vicinity of the health-checking services; we absolutely accept that. In my understanding, the trial is led to start in December. It is not just pill testing, it is drug checking, because the substance may not be in a pill form. But for those persons within – there are 10 drug festivals. Not drug festivals – sorry, I did not mean that. There are 10 music festivals where drug checking will be available, and we will take a wide berth around where those drug-checking facilities are within there. We absolutely acknowledge that health-led approach. From a Victoria Police perspective, we are in the final stages of finalising our operating processes and we are working with Health, but we will still have a presence outside of those festivals to ensure that there is not a tsunami of drugs that go in there. If people have drugs that are inside there, they will be checked and we will have a wide berth from there, but it is the intention of Victoria Police at this stage that we will still have a drug-checking operation at many of those festivals on the exterior of those festivals.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: This next question might actually go to what you were just saying at the end. Can you confirm that you will not keep track of people exiting the service and then stop and search them once they have been clear of the site?

Shane PATTON: Absolutely not. We are really clear: there will be a wide berth around those drug-checking facilities inside, and in discussions with Health, we will give clear instructions that anyone going to

those facilities for checking of their drugs and anyone leaving those facilities for the checking of their drugs will not be stopped because they have been there and done that. That will be part of our protocol – giving advice to my officers to that effect. So no-one will be targeted because they are entering or leaving a drug-checking facility.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Does the department expect that sniffer dogs will be in operation at any festivals participating in the pill-testing trial?

Shane PATTON: Yes.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Does the department acknowledge that there are instances when someone will consume all of their substances at once on sight of these dogs at an event and that can then lead to unintended overdose or terrible health impacts?

Shane PATTON: I cannot speak for what people do. As I have said, we will conduct our passive alert detector dog drug operations well distanced back from the entry to the facility, as we always have, and then we will absolutely steer clear of those who are getting their drugs checked inside, if they have drugs inside somehow. But we will continue to check out the front. Will that result in people consuming substances? I hope not. We do not want anyone to be harmed, but we have a responsibility, because if there is no operation by Victoria Police, then history would tell us that there would be a tsunami of drugs going in there. I am not naive; of course there will be drugs inside. For those drugs that get inside, we are not going to be targeting around those facilities.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Given the stationing of the sniffer dogs, though, is there anything to stop the sniffer dogs picking up substances on someone who will ultimately then go on to use the drug-checking service?

Shane PATTON: I am trying to follow what you have said.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: So if they are at the entrance or the exit, for example.

Shane PATTON: If someone got past us and they did not get checked and they went inside and they had drugs because they got inside with them and then they went to the drug-checking facility, well, so be it.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: But you are still checking them on the way in, is more to my point.

Shane PATTON: Yes.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. Thank you. On another matter, the Cultural Review of the Adult Custodial Corrections System reported nearly two years ago, and 18 months ago the Victorian government response was published. I just have some specific questions on the progress of commitments in that response report. Has a new assistant commissioner for Aboriginal services been appointed?

Kate HOUGHTON: Thank you. I will pass that to Mel Westin.

Melissa WESTIN: Thank you. Yes, we are delighted to announce that we have appointed a new deputy commissioner for workforce and Aboriginal outcomes, who recently commenced with us in Corrections Victoria.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. On page 8 the response says:

This year, the Department will review position descriptions, contracts and performance measures to incorporate principles of cultural safety...

Have they all been reviewed?

Melissa WESTIN: With regard to the implementation of actions off the back of the cultural review, we certainly publicly support the cultural review's reform directions and as an organisation acknowledge that long-term change is required to make our prisons safer – make people in our prisons and of course communities safer – and a sequential approach is being undertaken to ensure that efforts are sustainable. At this point we have formally acquitted 12 of the 86 recommendations and continue to work towards a number of the other recommendations, including the one that you have asked about just now.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: That sequential approach – when do you anticipate that to be completed?

Melissa WESTIN: It is a program that will go for many, many years, starting with the foundational elements of focusing on our workforce first and then moving towards some of the other elements that are addressed within the cultural review. But some of the key reforms that we have introduced this year: as mentioned, there is the appointment of our deputy commissioner and the appointment of an assistant commissioner for workforce. We have opened a new Aboriginal healing unit at the Dame Phyllis Frost Centre within 2023–24, which is an ACCO-led model by Elizabeth Morgan House, which has seen 26 referrals with 20 residents so far and 144 individual group programs delivered. There is a new model of primary health care across the public prison system, which engages both public and private health providers and new public health providers in the women’s prisons network; they also provide Aboriginal health checks for Aboriginal people right across the prison system. We have released an Aboriginal wellbeing officer recruitment and retention strategy, a Corrections Victoria workforce engagement strategy and a living experience strategy, along with a workforce behaviour framework, and we have recently released our workforce strategy for the next couple of years as well.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. A specific one from page 7: has a comprehensive review of the use-of-force policy framework been completed?

Melissa WESTIN: That is one of the future actions to be acquitted.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: That particular action – when do you expect that to be completed?

Melissa WESTIN: I cannot give you a timeframe on that. As I said, our reform program is really focused in its first instances around addressing the workforce-related actions, and then we will move into the more specific elements as well.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. I might just move on to fines reform. How much does the department’s administration of the fines system, and specifically enforcement of registered infringements, cost the department each year?

Kate HOUGHTON: Ms Chapman will come up. Can you just – that was just a tricky one, that one.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: It is the department’s administration of the fines system, specifically enforcement of registered infringements: how much has that cost the department each year?

Marian CHAPMAN: I do not have that figure. I am not sure we would be able to come up with it, but I am happy to take it on notice.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you; that is much appreciated. And this may also require to be taken on notice: how does the cost of enforcement compare to infringements revenue collected following registration of infringements with Fines Victoria?

Marian CHAPMAN: That is a similar category.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. This may be another flow-on: has the department analysed how much taxpayer money is wasted each year pursuing people in hardship for fines that they will never pay due to financial hardship or that they are not obliged to pay because they are eligible for one or more social justice initiatives?

Marian CHAPMAN: Not an analysis as such. There are extensive programs that support vulnerable people in the fines system, as you refer to. They include general enforcement reviews, reviews under special circumstances and access to the family violence scheme. There is the work and development permit program and the prison program. Each of those have slightly different criteria. They may mean an extension of payment; they may mean removal or a reduction to zero of that fine.

I can give you some figures that might be helpful. In 2023–24 there were \$51.39 million in fines that were within three of those schemes: the family violence scheme had 1757 applications finalised, and that resulted in \$13.2 million in fines being withdrawn; the work and development permit program had 4414 applications approved, and the value of fines worked off through that scheme was \$7.3 million; and the prison program had

3394 applications for fine waiver approved, with 163 applications heard and lodged at the Magistrates' Court, and the value of those fines worked off was \$30.89 million. So those three figures together come up to the \$51.39 million.

Kate HOUGHTON: And it is the department's intention to get that person to their eligibility of those various different pathways as soon as possible.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. I have actually got a follow-on just for that point. Just to clarify, is Fines Victoria advising people into a long-term payment plan when they may be eligible for a work development plan or other social justice initiative?

Marian CHAPMAN: Yes, that is absolutely right. We give at many stages when we interact with people that come and talk to us what their options are for either those social justice programs or those other programs that I referenced to help vulnerable people. We do that on our website, we do it through SMSs, we do it when people call in to talk about their fines options, and as the Secretary mentioned, we really encourage people to talk to us as early as possible in their infringement experience because you have more options the earlier things are. Fees are lower and also it is less stress for that person, so we really want them to engage with us. If it does get to the point of a warrant and the involvement of the sheriff, the sheriffs also provide extensive support to people and they go and talk to them about their options, so we really do want to support vulnerable people with how to deal with their fines.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. Just turning now to police responding to people experiencing mental health crises, in the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System Victoria Police stated in evidence that Victoria Police respond to a mental health crisis every 12 minutes. That was then; can you provide the committee with a percentage of police responses that involve individuals experiencing a mental health crisis from the 2023–24 period and since?

Shane PATTON: Yes, thanks. During that period we responded to approximately 54,400 mental health call-outs, one call almost every 10 minutes. In 26,943 of those call-outs two or more vehicles responded, and 10,600 people were taken into the care and control of police to connect them with a mental health assessment, known as a mental health transfer.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. That evidence also stated that many call-outs require a health-based intervention rather than a law enforcement one. When can this committee expect to see this shift of the intervention model to a health-based one?

Shane PATTON: As I understand, that was recommendation 10 from the royal commission into mental health. I understand they are matters for government.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: No, this was the police assistant commissioner for the eastern region, Glenn Weir. That was in that evidence provided that this claim was made.

Shane PATTON: Yes. One of the recommendations from the royal commission – and assistant commissioner Weir gave evidence in that on behalf of Victoria Police. Victoria Police want to be involved as little as possible in relation to a response to mental health, and we recognise and appreciate it should be a health-led response and approach. As I understand, that is a matter that is currently being worked through by government as to when and how that can be implemented.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. Another recommendation was that the *Victoria Police Manual* should be amended to reduce the incidence of individuals experiencing a mental health crisis being charged for conduct that occurs during a crisis. Has that occurred?

Shane PATTON: My belief is we have implemented every one of our recommendations that we have been able to. I would have to come back to you on that, but that is certainly our approach. When someone is having a mental health incident or episode, we want to treat them, care for them and get them treated appropriately. Nonetheless, we also are required to hold them to account where there is criminality involved. I will come back to that. I will take that on notice, but I am fairly certain that we have amended and completed all of our recommendations.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. Thank you, Chair.

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

Mathew HILAKARI: Thank you, Secretary, commissioners and officials for attending this morning and this afternoon. We do appreciate all the evidence that you give. I am going to move to the youth crime prevention program, and I will take us to the budget papers from 2023–24, budget paper 3, page 84. I am just hoping that you could talk, Secretary, and with assistance as required, on some of the programs that we have been engaging young people with and if there is any early evidence from those. I know it is only very recent, but I would appreciate any updates on that.

Kate HOUGHTON: Thank you. A lot of different parts of the department work on youth crime prevention from obviously the youth justice system. But specifically in Bill's team we have dedicated programs to reduce crime for young people, keep them busy and also deal with their offending behaviours or potential offending behaviours. Do you want to talk to the programs? Thanks, Bill.

Bill KYRIAKOPOULOS: Indeed. Thanks, Kate, and thanks for the question. The 2023–24 budget did provide \$13.64 million over three years for what we call the YCPP, the youth crime prevention program. That is for a three-year period, and it certainly has proven to be a very effective program, with a 29 per cent reduction in participant offending and a 24 per cent reduction in severity of offending for those that took part in the program. The YCPP, as the Secretary referenced, is part of a broader crime prevention program that has been supporting young people across the state since 2016–17. The YCPP in particular is a grants program that supports children and young people between the ages of 10 and 24 who are at risk of becoming involved in or who have been involved in or been exposed to the criminal justice system. Since it has commenced, the program has provided intensive case management and prosocial activities for more than 6000 young people. The program engages young people to achieve their goals through tailored supports that meet what they need as individuals, so it will be different in every case.

The tailored approach is important because we know that young people at high risk of offending generally have complex needs or are in complex situations, so effectively supporting young people to reduce risk of engagement with the criminal justice system across incidents of offending, recidivism and severity of offending means looking at the young person as a whole. It could be family situation, employment situation and so on – education, schooling. To this end the program aims to build a broad range of protective factors that are known to help address root causes of a person's offending. We invest in priority areas of the state that have higher levels of crime, including crime committed by young people, and higher levels of socio-economic disadvantage. The YCPP applies a place-based approach and is delivered via providers in a range of metro and regional locations. This is an important feature of the program because it allows local organisations to use their local evidence and local knowledge and partnerships to develop strategies and activities tailored to their particular communities, and that has obviously, as I said earlier, delivered positive results. This is an ultimately a very positive program, and for those that have either stopped offending or completely reduced any sort of offending it is a positive outcome for the young people and for their communities. I have got some case studies as well, if you would like, for particular areas.

Mathew HILAKARI: That would be fantastic. I might talk to some of the financials, because it was part of the early intervention investment framework. After I hear some of the examples, I would be keen to hear how it is matching up against that initial advice to government.

Bill KYRIAKOPOULOS: We have, as I said, very localised services as well. We have the Ballarat youth crime prevention program, which is delivered by Berry Street, and that brings together a range of partners in the region to address unique factors that contribute to young people's offending in that area. They coordinate referrals through a multiagency support team, and this ensures there is good understanding with both current and past support for the young people involved, which goes to the holistic nature of our services I referred to earlier. It also reduces retraumatising individuals, having to tell their stories multiple times, and supports the reduction in reoffending. This project focuses on people aged between 10 and 17, with a particular focus on vulnerable young people with complex needs who are at risk of recidivism, and their families as well. It provides case management, mentoring, coaching and prosocial activities for young people through well-established multiagency partnerships. Young people receive priority access to services and expert consultations but across the schools and community sector as well. There are monthly panels and workshops to build sector

capability as well. A key feature of the program is that it empowers young people in its assessment process by allowing them, where appropriate, to present their story to the panel in their own voices.

Mathew HILAKARI: My understanding is the early intervention framework is looking at maybe a 10-year timeframe, is that right, for the return on investment? It sounds like it is a three-year program, so I am keen to understand.

Kate HOUGHTON: The EIF program, as we call it, does provide funding with then a return. I think it is at three years as well as over a 10-year period for the continuation of the program. In terms of the specific youth crime prevention program's stats of effectiveness, it has got a 29 per cent reduction in participant offending, so that means then all the other end-of-line service systems do not need to be engaged, and then a 24 per cent reduction in the severity of offending, so that is the dividend back to the community through that EIF investment. If I may, I just wanted to talk about the diversion programs that youth justice do, and they also have a part of their funding that is funded through the EIF from a lived experience component for young people.

Mathew HILAKARI: Yes, of course. Just before we get there, you might be able to tell me as well the costs of a young person being held in custody for a year, because a \$13.6 million program over three years with 29 per cent reduction rates sounds extraordinary, but it would be good to get a comparison cost of how much it is to [inaudible] in the youth justice system.

Kate HOUGHTON: Absolutely. Thank you.

Andrea DAVIDSON: No problem. Thank you, Mr Hilakari, for your important questions around prevention and early intervention. It is a wonderful opportunity to really showcase in Victoria how we are tracking with our youth diversion program, which has been in place since 2017. Since that time we have had over 10,000 referrals into the program. Within this financial year that is subject to the hearing today we have had 1200 referrals, and we are sitting at a 98 per cent success rate in terms of completion of those diversions. Young people who are subject to diversion – it is also an opportunity as they have worked through that diversion to be able to move them into other support programs, such as the youth justice support program and the like, and ensure that their risks and needs are met ongoingly external to the system. There was a recent – not so much recent, but there was a two-year evaluation piece done, and it has revealed that for young people that participate in the diversion program there were much-reduced recidivism rates but also where there was reoffending that it occurred at a lesser rate and to a lesser seriousness.

Mathew HILAKARI: That is really great. I am going to keep on the youth justice sector at the moment. I will refer to budget paper 3, page 152, which talks to enhancing workforce training and support. That is in this year's budget. I was just hoping you could talk through what are the outcomes that we are seeking through that program and what are some of the supports that we are looking at.

Andrea DAVIDSON: Thank you, Mr Hilakari. I will start by saying that our staff in youth justice are our greatest asset. A capable and high-performing workforce means that young people in youth justice are in the best position to turn their lives around and not reoffend and that our staff are equipped with the skills and support they need to keep both themselves and young people safe within our systems. Investment in our workforce is a key driver of change for children and young people, and the youth justice custodial and community workforce plans were launched in 2020 in support of that aim. The plans target each part of the employee's life cycle to build a capable and high-performing youth justice custodial and community workforce. This includes attraction and retention initiatives and enhanced learning and capability offerings, including skill building to undertake the complex work of supporting young people and responding to their challenging behaviour.

Key initiatives implemented under the workforce plan include the certificate IV in youth justice for all of our custodial staff, an uplifted workforce model in custody, multidisciplinary practice support, including behaviour support specialists and senior disability practice advisers, a new operational safety training package and continued workforce support for our youth justice workers.

I will go to the certificate IV briefly. Under the plan a nationally recognised vocational qualification is now in place with a certificate IV in youth justice delivered to all custodial staff, which commenced in 2022. The certificate IV provides staff with a structured, tailored learning program that combines an intensive youth worker induction and prepares them for their operational role and continues to build their capability over the

first 12 months of their service. By 30 June this year 216 of our staff had achieved the qualification, and in 2023–24, 310 of our YJW1 to 2 staff were placed across 20 foundation intakes for the year. Youth justice workers at the YJW1 classification receive a salary progression increase in their pay or a one-off bonus payment upon completion of that certificate IV, and in line with the VPS enterprise bargaining agreement of this year, our YJW2 staff under that uplifted workforce model are now also eligible for the completion progression or once-off bonus once they have completed that certificate IV.

We have also implemented the workforce uplift model in the last 12 months, and that has seen youth justice invest in an uplifted model for custodial unit-based staff, which was initially rolled out at Cherry Creek in February and leveraged that fit-for-purpose infrastructure and a more therapeutic operating model. The uplifted youth justice worker and unit supervisor accountabilities, capabilities and salaries have been aligned to higher classification levels to reflect the expectation for employees to deliver additional therapeutic interventions to support behaviour change in young people in custody and improve their outcomes. The uplifted workforce model was implemented at Parkville also on 10 October in 2023 and funded internally by youth justice.

Implementation of the uplifted workforce model has improved our attraction and retention and increased our workforce numbers. We have also implemented a new operational safety training package in 2021, which provides staff with a suite of response capabilities to manage incidents involving young people more effectively and more safely. It is a purpose-built, bespoke tactical options package that addresses the unique concerns and vulnerabilities of children and young people in custody. It uses de-escalation, risk assessment, relational security and engagement and draws on a trauma-informed practice at its core. All youth justice staff are required to complete this OST foundational training package, and we have an advanced package that is available for our safety and emergency response team that has specialist skills that they require to manage more complex incidents. The training has a really positive effect, and I can provide some data there. Between July and September of this year, analysis that we have done has revealed that 86 per cent of our incidents across our custodial centres were resolved using non-physical interventions. That is really demonstrating to us that, through techniques such as negotiation, de-escalation, communication and redirection, staff are more safely able to resolve those incidents.

Also, under the workforce plan, youth justice have improved our multidisciplinary professional practice, particularly through the recruitment of dedicated behaviour support specialists. Behaviour support specialists help build staff capacity to support young people with extremely complex needs. They also support staff to deliver young people's behaviour support approach based on their individual behaviour support plans and case plans. At 30 June 2024 we had 14 behaviour support specialists employed across youth justice precincts, and in addition we also now have seven specialist senior disability practice adviser roles that provide upskilling to staff in communication, engaging effectively with young people with a disability. They also support our assessment and access to services via the NDIS for better outcomes for young people.

As a part of the workforce plan a range of practical supports have also been implemented in youth justice custody, such as squad leaders and staff mentors to ensure that our trainees and new starters are supported in their transition, a peer support program for all custodial staff as a primary intervention for psychological support and a dedicated health and wellbeing team which supports our staff through a program that includes wellbeing and psychological health, managing stress, mental health support, individual counselling and crisis support, and through that program there is an onsite clinician whom staff are able to seek individual psychological support from at both precincts. Youth justice's safety and emergency response team also run regular coaching and refresher sessions on situational awareness and tactical options to build confidence and staff capability for responding to incidents.

For young people under supervision, case managers also utilise a range of other treatment and intervention options to address serious offending behaviours, noting that our case managers are based within our community youth justice facilities. Skilled case managers within each of our regions are allocated to young people, utilising a validated assessment tool, and they develop case plans and evidence-based interventions to address the factors that are underpinning offending behaviour for each young person. We then provide expert clinical oversight to support frontline staff to ensure that these interventions are effective and are tailored to address individual complexity, risk and need. Case reviews are undertaken to ensure that the targeting of these interventions is effective, particularly in relation to our high-need cohorts, including our young people in youth justice.

Mathew HILAKARI: Just to follow on from that – and thank you for that information – for young people with disability in custody across the state, do we have figures on that or as a percentage for the 2023–24 year?

Andrea DAVIDSON: What I have is as per our youth justice annual survey, which was delivered on 3 June this year. Of all young people under youth justice supervision, 22 per cent had a documented or diagnosed active cognitive difficulty, 57 per cent had an active mental health diagnosis, 89 per cent had a history of alcohol or other drug misuse and 44 per cent were also, in terms of other vulnerabilities, not living with parents, relatives or kin – so experiencing some kind of homelessness concern. Those are some key stats around the vulnerabilities and needs of our young people.

Mathew HILAKARI: Is that on entrance into the custodial environment or is that as people pass through the custodial environment and are assessed, because you did have a number of people who were engaged in disability – maybe not assessment but support?

Andrea DAVIDSON: Yes, our senior disability advisers and our classification and placement unit are primarily the element of our workforce which are focused on assessment, and that occurs from the moment that young people come into custody. Whether young people are in custody with us for a day, a week or year, that assessment will commence from the moment they enter into our facilities. It is very much focused on identifying often disabilities which have gone unidentified until that point in time.

Mathew HILAKARI: Thank you to those staff in particular for all the work that is done in this sometimes difficult and challenging environment. Chief Commissioner, I am going to just turn to BlueHub, an important program that was certainly referenced in the 2023–24 budget at budget paper 3, page 82. I am just hoping you could outline some of the programs that have been delivered by BlueHub for supporting police mental health and wellbeing.

Shane PATTON: Thanks very much. The BlueHub is an initiative of the police association which provides expert psychological assessment and tailored trauma and mental health treatments to current sworn Victorian police members and Victorian-based AFP members as well – Australian Federal Police. It was initially set up in 2020 as a three-year pilot program and was officially launched in 2021, and for us it has been quite successful. It has been a primary contact point for those members that I have just outlined experiencing mental health trauma, crisis or injury, and it connects individuals with clinicians with expertise in working with police and through Phoenix Australia also provides tailored training and ongoing support for BlueHub clinicians.

There are a whole range of different, if you like, activities that are going on in terms of Victoria Police in how we are trying to provide support to our members. We appreciate how busy they are, how under the pump they are in terms of what they are doing and the stresses they are involved in. We have also developed a range of different programs that we involve them with. We have a number of programs through a trauma group. It is an evidence-based, informed program for working police members who are displaying mild or moderate symptoms of work-related trauma. We have a reflective practice injury management consultant program and a range of other pathways, but importantly we also have a number of health and wellbeing hubs, and two of them we have launched in our eastern and our western region. The hubs are comprised of specialised services including mental health clinicians, injury management consultants, psychosocial safety consultants, educators, career advisers and human resource business partners, and since the implementation of those hubs we have already seen a 12.61 per cent improvement to the 26-week return-to-work performance for mental injuries in the eastern region.

There is no silver bullet when it comes to dealing with mental health or police and/or first responders; it is a whole, cumulative impact of a suite of programs, and we keep working at it. They do a fantastic job. We want to get ahead of the game and prevent them becoming ill and having stress through mental health, and that is why we have introduced those mental health hubs. But it is a really tough job we do.

Mathew HILAKARI: How important is it to members to have trusted professionals to be referred to, because it is a unique role that is played?

Shane PATTON: Yes, absolutely, and that has always been the case. We have an employee assistance program as well, as do other agencies, but it is that trust, and people who, as through the BlueHub, understand police and understand the stresses and have that specific expertise in engaging with them.

Mathew HILAKARI: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Chief Commissioner and Mr Hilakari.

Secretary and Chief Commissioner, thank you so much for taking the time to appear before us today. It is very much appreciated. The committee is going to follow up on any questions taken on notice, 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 Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions at 1:30 pm.

I declare this hearing adjourned.

Witnesses withdrew.