

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into 2020–21 Financial and Performance Outcomes

Melbourne—Friday, 12 November 2021

MEMBERS

Ms Lizzie Blandthorn—Chair

Mr Danny O’Brien—Deputy Chair

Mr Sam Hibbins

Mr David Limbrick

Mr Gary Maas

Mrs Beverley McArthur

Mr James Newbury

Ms Pauline Richards

Mr Tim Richardson

Ms Nina Taylor

WITNESSES

Ms Sandy Pitcher, Secretary,

Mr Ben Rimmer, Associate Secretary, and Chief Executive Officer, Homes Victoria,

Mr Argiri Alisandratos, Deputy Secretary, Children, Families, Communities and Disability,

Ms Janine Toomey, Senior Executive Director, Operations Support,

Ms Eleri Butler, Chief Executive Officer, Family Safety Victoria,

Ms Brigid Monagle, Acting Deputy Secretary, Readiness, Response and Emergency Management,

Ms Nicola Young, Acting Deputy Secretary, Fairer Victoria,

Mr Andrew Minack, Deputy Secretary, Corporate and Delivery Services, and

Ms Cynthia Lahiff, Chief Finance Officer, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing.

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

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 2020–21 Financial and Performance Outcomes. Its aim is to gauge what the government achieved in 2020–21 compared to what the government planned to achieve.

Please note that witnesses and members may remove their masks when speaking to the committee but must replace them afterwards.

All mobile telephones should now be turned to silent.

All evidence taken by this committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. 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. Verified transcripts, presentations and handouts will be placed on the committee's website as soon as possible.

We welcome the Secretary of the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing and officers. Thank you for being here today. We invite you to make a 10-minute presentation, and this will be followed by questions from the committee. Thank you.

Visual presentation.

Ms PITCHER: Thank you, Chair. So thank you for the opportunity to appear before the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee today. I would like to echo the Chair in recognising and acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting and pay my respects to elders past and present.

It is a very great privilege to lead the new Department of Families, Fairness and Housing. Our vision is to empower communities to build a fairer and safer Victoria. We want Victoria to be a place that is free from disadvantage and discrimination, where all people can have meaningful lives. As the committee is aware, the department was actually established on 1 February this year and brought together key portfolio areas from the former Department of Health and Human Services and the Department of Premier and Cabinet. Together we are now well positioned to meet these complex needs of people and communities that we support, and together we are making our state more equal and inclusive for everyone.

It has been a demanding year for Victorians, and we have all felt the continued impacts of the COVID pandemic as well as the day-to-day challenges people are experiencing in their lives. Our staff have worked very hard through this challenging time and remain committed to our department's goals. We do this work because we know it benefits the whole community, and that is why I am so proud of the work our department does and its capacity for supporting the people of Victoria.

I will just go now, on this slide, to talk through the vision of the department, and obviously as we are a new department we have the new vision, which is to empower communities for a fairer and safer Victoria. Highlighted here are a number of the budget decisions that are really focused on becoming a fairer Victoria. The initiatives are up on the screen, but just so people can have a span of our coverage, we have \$3.92 billion to build over 12 000 new public housing properties across our state; we have \$150.8 million to continue much-needed assistance for Victorians experiencing homelessness; we have \$1.2 billion to keep children safe and families strong, and this builds on previous investments of \$1.4 billion in the previous financial year and \$1 billion to increase out-of-home care placements, trial new support models and fund new child protection practitioners; we have \$87.3 million in additional support for children and young people and adults impacted by family violence; \$198.5 million for services and programs to support Victorians with a disability who are not covered by the NDIS; and \$28.1 million to implement the *Gender Equality Act* and the gender equality programs, including establishing the Commission for Gender Equality in the Public Sector. So you will see that is a very big expanse of issues and areas that we cover.

And going to the purpose of today's committee, this slide really gives us a chance to look at the department's performance during COVID-19, which spans the financial year that we are considering today—a very challenging year for all Victorians, and particularly for those Victorians who this department seeks to support. We have had to be really adaptive and change in order to deliver services during COVID, and the pandemic has impacted the department's performance against a number of BP3 measures in the budget. But in spite of the challenges that COVID continues to throw at us, and there have been many, the department has innovated and done things differently with commitment, responsiveness and care. And this slide really provides some examples of our achievements.

A big part of our ongoing COVID-19 response is partnering with and listening to the experiences of people in our community so we can respond and support them more effectively. And this focus applies to all of our work across all of our many portfolios. It is how we have built inclusive and responsive services and how we will continue to engage and recover going forward.

In terms of one of our big focuses, or foci, I mentioned earlier the 2020–21 state budget invested \$1.2 billion to continue transforming our child protection system to one focused on earlier intervention and support. And this is really important for the way that we are refocusing our work. Three key examples of this are integrated family services, Cradle to Kinder and Aboriginal Cradle to Kinder, which are evidence-based programs looking at much earlier intervention. We have also got 246 new child protection practitioners across the state, bolstering the workforce to keep more children safe and families stronger, and funding to support landmark reforms so that more children and young people in care have the settled and stable lives that they deserve, including expanding the groundbreaking Home Stretch and Better Futures programs, which give all Victorian young people in care a place to call home until they turn 21. And we are really proud of that work, and certainly speaking to the young people involved, it has made demonstrable differences to so many lives already.

In terms of our performance, more than 16 300 Child First assessments and interventions were conducted, exceeding our target of 8064, which reflects both the critical need for these services and the responsiveness of Child First to vulnerable families. As such, more than 40 000 family care service cases were provided in 2020–21, exceeding the target of 33 235. And finally, again in response to the coronavirus pandemic, the government invested \$4.45 million to establish the coronavirus emergency response for children and young people involved with child protection, which because we are the public service we have given an acronym, CERCY, which is a model of care for at-risk children and young people—again, another important initiative that has really been focused on helping people who were unable to quarantine in their usual care arrangements.

I want to talk now about an inclusive Victoria and a real focus on supporting people with a disability to live lives that are satisfying. We have continued to support people with a disability to live their lives, and we have over 108 000 Victorians participating in the national disability insurance scheme, which is achieving the 2020–21 target. This has been complemented by \$78.9 million in 2020–21 to support a range of services outside the

scope of the NDIS, delivering on the government's commitment to continue to provide support to Victoria's disability service clients who have not been able to transition to the NDIS. In addition, I really want to call out that we have supported the commencement of the disability workers regulation scheme and established the Disability Worker Registration Board of Victoria and the Victorian Disability Worker Commission. We have also been working on a state disability plan, including the delivery of a dedicated Victorian autism plan and continual support for people with disability during the pandemic. And finally, we have been helping Victorians with a disability and their families across timely and targeted advocacy support by supporting more than 2700 disability advocacy clients, exceeding that target, which we had set at 2000.

Moving on now to talk about housing, which as you would all know is a very big and important part of our portfolio, the department is committed to supporting Victorians to access safe and secure housing, with over 31 000 Victorians provided with accommodation in 2020–21, exceeding the target of 30 000. Over 75 per cent of homelessness service clients engaged with support services and accessed or maintained housing compared to our target of 72 per cent. The government has made a massive investment—\$3.9 billion—to deliver over 12 000 new homes, including 9300 social housing properties which replace 1100 old social housing dwellings, and we are developing 2900 affordable housing dwellings.

A further \$150.8 million was provided to support people experiencing homelessness requiring emergency hotel accommodation during COVID, and I am sure the committee knows that this is a very big focus of my department and our services during COVID. We extended emergency hotel accommodation for up to 2000 Victorians experiencing homelessness, and we enhanced our private rental assistance. We looked at flexible support headlease arrangements on more than 1000 properties from the private rental market, again helping people transition from homelessness and emergency accommodation into our goal of long-term stable housing. In addition, \$18.2 million was provided to enhance family violence refuge responses to enable 24-hour access and implement other recommendations of the Royal Commission into Family Violence.

Now, moving onto our focus on promoting a fairer Victoria with equality, inclusion and social cohesion, we have many key achievements in this area: the establishment of Victoria's first public sector gender equality commissioner, the establishment of a CALD communities task force and the pride centre that was opened in the middle of this year. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Secretary. Deputy Chair.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Thank you, Chair. And thank you, Secretary and your team, for being here this afternoon. Secretary, you just touched on public housing. Page 37 of the annual report shows the average waiting time for clients needing priority access to public housing as a result of domestic violence is 11 months. I am sure every MP could tell you about cases, but certainly in my situation I have had significant numbers of them coming through my office in the last 12 or 18 months. What is being done to house those families now?

Ms PITCHER: Thank you for your question, and it is a really timely one because, as you are probably aware, we have seen an increase in need through the COVID-19 pandemic for a whole range of homelessness services and particularly the interface where we have had increased numbers of reporting of family violence as a result of COVID, as well as obviously housing challenges. I might turn to my deputies to give more detail about that focus, but I just would like to stress that it has been one of the things where we have spent a good deal of focus looking at the needs of families and how we can provide support for the whole family in that housing situation.

Mr D O'BRIEN: As you do that, I appreciate the focus on it, but if you look at the data in the annual report, going back four years it was 8.8 months. Then it was 10.3 months, then it was 9.9 months and now it is 11.1 months. So it has actually been going up for the last couple of years.

Mr RIMMER: Absolutely. There are a number of factors going on, Mr O'Brien. The housing waiting list overall has increased in fact over the past five years and in particular in the last 12 months. The housing waiting list, as you will appreciate, is a product of overall economic circumstances and market conditions, and clearly for a large number of Victorians the last 18 months have been extremely challenging in terms of their private income and their access to the labour market. We have seen that definitely reflected in applications for social housing, including for victim-survivors of family violence.

The other factor that has been going on is over the last three or four years there has been a concerted effort to provide better support to people living in public housing and therefore have fewer people leaving public housing because their circumstances, their complexities, get too much for them and they cannot sustain the tenancy. We are really trying to do the Housing First thing of keeping people in their place with the supports that they need to sustain their home. The slightly counterintuitive impact of that is that that means we have fewer vacant houses to allocate. So that, combined with some COVID-19 restrictions on people being able to move house at various times and those kinds of things—all of those things coming together has really had an impact. But that is also why there are 16 000 dwellings of housing currently in the pipeline to deliver new social and affordable housing options to the Victorian community. That is why the government have responded in the way that they have.

Mr D O'BRIEN: How many of those will be specifically available for victims of family violence?

Mr RIMMER: There are a range of different systems in place. There are some houses—and my colleague might wish to talk to this—that are really allocated through the family violence system, but the vast majority of the housing support that is provided in social housing for victim-survivors of family violence is provided through the priority access register of the Victorian housing waiting list. I think the proportion of people who have family violence listed as one of their factors is something in the order of 20 or 25 per cent, and I might be able to come back to that—

Mr D O'BRIEN: Could I—

Mr RIMMER: Which means—sorry, Mr O'Brien, this is very important—at least a quarter of the houses that we allocate are allocated to victim-survivors of family violence.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Yes. What I am after, though, is what is being done about the backlog, and can I get a figure for 2020–21 on how many of the new builds were actually allocated for family violence—or are they not specifically allocated?

Mr RIMMER: With a few small exceptions housing is created so that it can respond flexibly to the new and emerging circumstances of the community. In some cases that might be someone with a mental health challenge. In some cases that might be someone who is a victim-survivor of family violence. But what we can tell you is that our experience is that a very high proportion of social housing allocations are just people who have experience of family violence.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Just off topic briefly but on the question of what the new builds are going to, is there a percentage allocated to disability housing?

Mr RIMMER: I am not trying to be difficult, Mr O'Brien—

Mr D O'BRIEN: I am losing time, so you are, at the moment, with respect.

Mr RIMMER: Specialist disability accommodation is a different thing. I am not sure whether that is what you are referring to. Within the normal social housing stock a high number of those houses—I think 5 or 10 per cent—are designed with a very high degree of accessibility built in, which meets the situations of many clients, and all of the new buildings are built to silver standard, which has a high level of accessibility built in.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Okay. Could I perhaps get on notice what that figure actually is—you said 5 per cent or 10 per cent—and obviously for 2020–21 the actual number that were either built or started for that high level of disability?

Mr RIMMER: I am happy to take that on notice.

Mr D O'BRIEN: So when will we see the waitlist for people fleeing family violence come down?

Mr RIMMER: That is a good question, and there is no answer that anyone from any portfolio can give to that. It is the result of how many houses we are building, the broader economic circumstances, the broader circumstances in the housing market and in housing price appreciation and all kinds of things that are well outside the control of the public servants in front of you, Mr O'Brien. But what is important to have in mind is that the current pipeline of new housing development is the largest in history, to be frank.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Yes, I absolutely understand that, and in fact I applaud the government for doing so, but the *Report on Government Services* has shown a number of times over recent years that we have been the worst in the country in terms of our stock of public housing, so it is really only getting us up to where we should be for a start. So can I perhaps just move on to the bigger picture, the general register for priority access. Currently the waiting time is at 12.4 months. When will that actually come down?

Mr RIMMER: I think I have given the answer in the previous question. There is a team of 500 people who are building houses literally as fast as the market is able to provide them right now, so have a go at that.

Mr D O'BRIEN: I think you talked about the waiting list before. I believe there is currently 52 926 households on the register. Is that the correct figure?

Mr RIMMER: Yes, that is correct.

Mr D O'BRIEN: How much bigger is that list projected to get before it actually starts coming down? Sorry, let me put it another way: when will that figure start coming down?

Mr RIMMER: That projection is not something that we routinely do, Mr O'Brien.

Mr D O'BRIEN: No, but if we know what the waiting list is, we are expending over \$5 billion on the Big Housing Build, surely that is to address the waiting list. When will we see it start to fall?

Mr RIMMER: Mr O'Brien, with respect, the premise of the question is false. A small change in commonwealth income support payments will have a very significant impact on the housing waiting list, probably as big or bigger an impact on the housing waiting list as the number of new houses that we are building. So it is actually impossible to model that with any real kind of certainty because there are so many other factors that go into it, including the rate of Newstart payments, the amount of people who get access to the disability support pension, affordability changes in the private market and any number of other factors.

Mr D O'BRIEN: I get all that, and I appreciate you cannot forecast with any certainty, but surely if we are expending this amount of money to build, what is it, 16 000 new dwellings—I mean, even on base figures that is going to take 16 000 households out of the wait lists. Surely there must be some point in time where you hope that you will start to turn it around.

Mr RIMMER: Of course we hope that the houses that we are building are going to have an impact on that figure. The most important thing from our perspective is getting the houses built and getting Victorians who need that housing support into those houses.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Okay. Just an issue that I raised with the minister in the last estimates but we ran out of time and I do not know that we ever got an answer is the issue of homeless people, particularly from the CBD, who have been housed in hotel accommodation through last year. Has that project or that program been completed? Are there still people being housed in hotels? If so, how long will that stay for?

Mr RIMMER: There are still people being housed in hotels. As of 8 November there were 2447 people in hotel-based emergency accommodation. I would stress that a significant number of those are not in the CBD: it is about a third in kind of inner Melbourne, a third in outer Melbourne and a third in kind of regional communities. There are two policy responses to that cohort that have now been announced. One is the Homelessness to a Home program, which you will be aware of from previous PAEC hearings and other things. In addition, more recently the government announced an additional \$66 million in funding particularly targeting families with children who are in emergency hotel accommodation. There is in the order of 200 to 250 families with children who are currently in COVID-related crisis accommodation and the government has asked us to create a housing response for that cohort of people.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Okay. Can I go back to the question, which I may not have put clearly. When will the hotel program be—

Mr RIMMER: Oh sorry. I apologise, Mr O'Brien. We expect the hotel program to effectively de-escalate, if I can put it like that, over the course of the next two to three months. I would imagine by the end of the first quarter next year that program will be finished. Obviously it is not in anyone's interest for that program to kind of stop overnight.

Mr D O'BRIEN: And the programs that you have just outlined are what? In answer to the question, 'Where do they go then?'. You are trying to house them through those other programs you mentioned.

Mr RIMMER: So some go into the Homelessness to a Home program, some go into the new homes for families program, some receive the support from the homelessness service system to be referred into a wide range of housing support options—rooming houses, crisis accommodation—and some will return to family and friends. There will be all kinds of choices that people make at that point.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Okay. On a related but very different issue, when were the external windows of the high-rise towers in the inner city last cleaned?

Mr RIMMER: Oh.

Mr D O'BRIEN: You are going to take that on notice?

Mr RIMMER: Mr O'Brien, you have me. I have mountains of material in front of me. I literally have a large amount of data in front of me, but I cannot tell you the answer to that question.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Could you take it on notice—

Ms PITCHER: But we will take that on notice, yes.

Mr D O'BRIEN: perhaps with a breakdown by tower, so Carlton, Collingwood, Fitzroy, Kensington et cetera. If you could provide that on notice, that would be welcome.

Mr RIMMER: With pleasure. I would be interested in the answer myself.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Yes. Thank you. I think it is an issue that has been raised. Can I move to out-of-home care. Presumably, Secretary, going back to the start of the vaccination program in February or March, the department would have a policy, a program, a plan for helping to ensure that kids in out-of-home care and foster care were vaccinated. Would that be correct?

Ms PITCHER: Yes, absolutely.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Can you tell me what percentage of out-of-home care children have received their COVID vaccinations? Perhaps as at 30 June, unless you have got an update for now. That would be useful.

Mr ALISANDRATOS: Mr O'Brien, we might need to take that one on notice just in terms of the time period that you are asking for. So are you saying back on 30 June, as of 30 June?

Mr D O'BRIEN: Well, consistent with the outcomes hearings, that would be the ideal, but noting that that is going to be very out of date, if you can provide a more current figure.

Mr ALISANDRATOS: We can provide a figure relating back to that time, but it is fair to say that we have been doing a lot of work across our services and with our service providers to engage and support both carers and young people that are being cared for to get vaccinated. There are a whole range of initiatives that have been put in place, including pop-up clinics and encouragement through the Department of Health to really get our carers—particularly in home-based care significant numbers of children have been vaccinated.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Could I get both first and fully vaccinated percentage figures if you will.

Mr ALISANDRATOS: Yes, we can come back to you.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Both percentages and actual numbers, if you can. That would be great.

Mr ALISANDRATOS: Indeed.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Has the department made a determination that carers and foster carers need to be vaccinated?

Ms PITCHER: Yes.

Mr ALISANDRATOS: Yes.

Mr D O'BRIEN: So that will be compulsory?

Ms PITCHER: Yes.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Do you know what percentage are currently fully vaccinated?

Mr ALISANDRATOS: Again, we could come back to you with the actual numbers, Mr O'Brien, but we would say on the residential care side of it, particularly with paid personnel that are looking after children, they are required to be—mandated to be—vaccinated. A large majority of them, so probably in the vicinity of about 85 to 90 per cent, are vaccinated. Of course there are variations across the provider cohort, but that is the sort of line that we are at at the moment.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Consistent with the wider community.

Mr ALISANDRATOS: Correct.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Can you perhaps take on notice whether we have lost—and if so, how many—foster and emergency foster carers as a result of the mandate for vaccination?

Mr ALISANDRATOS: Yes, we can do that. I have not heard of foster carers that we have lost, but in terms of residential care staff, there is a very small proportion of our residential care staff that are either hesitant or anxious about being vaccinated, but it really is a very small proportion.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Okay. If you are happy to take that on notice, that would be good. Secretary, how many foster care or child protection data breaches occurred during the reporting period?

If you want to take it on notice if you do not have it, Secretary, I am interested also in a detailed list of each breach that can be provided to the committee, if you can.

Ms PITCHER: Well, I am happy to take that on notice, because I cannot put my finger on that data at the moment. So yes, we are happy to report to you on just the number of breaches and the nature of those breaches.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Okay. That would be good. This is a question that for my sins I have been asking for about seven years now, but can you tell me how many unallocated clients, as in unallocated cases, there have been in the child protection sector for the year in question? I think there is a percentage attached to the annual report, but I am after the actual number.

Ms PITCHER: Well, we talk about the percentages because it is a very dynamic system. I know that conversation has happened in the past. We have got an unallocated case percentage change I think of minus 10.8 per cent, so that is a variation in this financial year. And the rate is very dynamic and changes throughout the year.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Well, I think the data at the end of the annual report in an appendix gives it a breakdown percentage by quarter, and so could I get the actual number at 30 June—the number of unallocated child protection cases?

Ms PITCHER: Do you want it to be the number though on that date, or do you want us to look across—

Mr D O'BRIEN: Well, whatever you can provide, but given, as you say, it will go up and down, if you can provide an average over the four quarters, that would be useful. But an actual number, not just a percentage.

Ms PITCHER: Yes. We are just very conscious that, because of the dynamic nature of it, giving an actual number at any point in time probably does not really tell the full picture.

Mr D O'BRIEN: We have had it in the past, Secretary. There has been a number provided, so if you could do so, that would be great.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr O'Brien. Your time has expired. Mr Maas.

Mr MAAS: Thanks, Chair. And thank you, Secretary, and your departmental team as well, for your appearance this afternoon. Look, I too would like to start off with housing and go to the Big Housing Build. I will probably take a slightly different frame than Mr O'Brien took in that I would actually like to take a look at the actual deliverables and the process too. In the questionnaire at question 2 you mention that the Big Housing Build was one of the programs that was delivering important outcomes for the community. I was hoping you would be able to outline what the build has been able to deliver so far.

Ms PITCHER: I am very happy to do so, and then I can hand to my Associate Secretary for further detail. As the committee is aware, the government announced \$5.3 billion for the Big Housing Build in November 2020. So we are coming up to the one-year mark for that. And the aim was building over 12 000 new social and affordable houses over four years, and this will increase the social housing stock in Victoria by 10 per cent, which does go to the premise of some of the earlier questions. Starting with the five fast-start projects that are already under construction—and that is really part of the big delivery at the moment—862 homes will be delivered by that by the end of 2023 on Homes Victoria land, with the sixth project on track to appoint a contractor by the end of next month, December 2021.

We have also been doing purchases under the Big Housing Build, which enables us obviously to deliver more immediately. More than 1100 homes have been purchased under the Big Housing Build, including 514 homes in ready-to-build projects. 414 of these homes are already tenanted or ready to be tenanted, with more coming online as properties go through settlement. So we do have that dynamic and ongoing increase in actually seeing families and people in homes. And we have had grant funding of \$740 million provided to 22 community housing agencies to build more than 2300 homes across Victoria, and that is through our Social Housing Growth Fund. That is probably our biggest focus, and really we have a whole lot of extra housing stock coming on stream through all of those different impacts. I might hand to my Associate Secretary to see if there is any further detail, including perhaps the regional focus.

Mr RIMMER: Thank you, Secretary. Mr Maas, the program is now well underway. You will recall that the Big Housing Build is \$5.3 billion. About \$1.86 billion of that amount has now been contracted, and about \$435 million, from memory, has now been spent. And we are on track: by the end of this financial year we expect that we will have contracted a bit over \$2.2 billion of that amount, and that is part of the wider portfolio I was talking about earlier with Mr O'Brien. So in total we have currently got about \$2.5 billion worth of construction contracts out that have been let across about 760 sites and about 5700 new dwellings coming from that.

The Big Housing Build is a four-year program, but a lot of that procurement has already happened. The whole procurement and delivery process is now well underway. As the Secretary said, some of that has been through some spot purchasing in the market, particularly in the financial year that this PAEC hearing is concerned with. Some of it is projects that we are developing ourselves and that are really just now coming to fruition, because they were kind of started when the Big Housing Build was announced. Some of it is work that we have procured from the private sector. There are a number of developers, particularly in regional Victoria, who have in fact at least sold us projects that they were working on, and so that has been an important way. The housing market generally has been pretty strong, but in pockets different developers have found it harder or easier to continue with their work program, and so we have helped to kind of smooth that over and make sure that people keep employed, the housing is continuing to get built. So overall in the Big Housing Build 25 per cent is committed to regional Victoria, which basic maths says is \$1.25 billion, and hundreds of millions of that is already committed now and out in the market causing real employment and real homes to be built.

Mr MAAS: That is great, and I am glad you mentioned employment, because where I am going to pivot to next is around the economic impact of the build. So there are a few parts to this question. I was hoping you would be able to go into details around: what outcomes have been achieved in terms of economic productivity and economic stimulus; also how many jobs has the program already created; and finally, what economic activity has it generated?

Ms PITCHER: Thanks for the question, and it is a really important part of this program. I think the essence of the Big Housing Build is really: how do we house people, but how do we also stimulate the economy, and how can we even employ people who will be housed in those houses in the projects as well? So there are lots of different ways that we are looking at the dollars and the Victorian taxpayers dollars making that impact.

The projection of the Big Housing Build in terms of employment is that we will generate an average of 10 000 jobs over the four years, and we know that as our delivery activity continues to ramp up across the program we will see more and more jobs created and we will have more and more evidence to be able to give you in these future PAECs. So since November 2020, which was when the Big Housing Build commenced, we have had more than 770 direct jobs and 2700 indirect jobs that have been created, and that really measures that expend and that activity across those areas. And just to give you a bit of a sense of the expanse of where the job creation happens, there are obviously jobs in the building and construction sector that I think is where people immediately think of when they think of the Big Housing Build, but we have also got professional services, such as architects, designers and associated sectors, that are really seeing the work happen with the Big Housing Build. And it is really important to think about the economic impact not just in those sectors but the way that this impacts across regional Victoria, because as the Associate Secretary said, we are building all across Victoria. We have had a real focus on dwellings for Aboriginal housing, so we are looking at employment across Aboriginal organisations and for Aboriginal people as well, and it just is one of those multipliers where we are really looking at the social impact of the dollars that we are spending.

Mr MAAS: Great. Thank you. Both of you have already mentioned regional impact. Would you be able to go into detail about the projects and the outcomes that are underway in regional areas in Victoria?

Ms PITCHER: I am happy to start off, and then the Associate Secretary can join. We have got over 18 local government areas that have been identified for the minimum investment guarantee, and that means that \$765 million is committed across these 18 local government areas. And across those programs we have got the in progress and ready to build program. The regional request for proposal process was released to market in early October 2021, so just last month, to seek well-considered value-for-money proposals in regional Victoria. So we are currently doing that evaluation now, and as we mentioned earlier, that really is trying to take advantage of where there was already movement in the sector and where we can make fast movement but also to stimulate new projects that perhaps were not going to happen without the opportunity that the Big Housing Build presents.

And further to this, we have got a regional housing round under the Social Housing Growth Fund. That has just been released and proposals are due in February next year, so that is another one that is continuing to go. And then we have also got the Social Housing Growth Fund rapid grant round, and that is funding 44 projects to build 583 homes in the regional areas, and Greater Geelong is counted in that for the purposes of this committee. So that is another example, really, where we are seeing speed for our money and getting people into houses quicker. Did you have anything to add, Ben?

Mr RIMMER: Just to give a couple of practical examples, the minimum investment guarantee—the Secretary mentioned 18 local government areas. So, for example, in Baw Baw shire it is \$35 million, and we are already pretty confident of spending \$12 million there. We have still got some work to do. Conversely, in Ballarat there is \$80 million allocated in the minimum investment guarantee there, and we are already very confident that we will hit that target and in fact probably exceed that target. But then, of course, the 18 local government areas are only 18 of about 46 regional local government areas, so there is about \$465 million that the other regional and rural local government areas are able to participate and partner with us in to deliver high-quality projects.

So, as an example, there is about \$11 million worth of work happening in Benalla, which is not one of the minimum investment guarantee areas. We are hoping that if not all then close to all local government areas in Victoria end up participating in the Big Housing Build one way or another. The really pleasing thing is that local councils in very different and varied parts of the state are thinking about these issues, are thinking about what it means for their communities, are working with community housing providers or Aboriginal community controlled organisations and approaching us with ideas and saying, ‘Well, we’ve got this land. We’ve got this idea. We want to work in partnership. Can you help us get on with that and get some affordable housing delivered?’, in places which have had very significant affordability issues over the last period.

Mr MAAS: Okay. Thank you. You have mentioned a couple of different cohorts as to who the housing might be for. Would you be able to give me a bit of a breakdown of that and what outcomes for different cohorts are needed to be safe and the affordable housing that has been built to achieve that so far?

Mr RIMMER: Thank you for the question. We talked earlier about the relationship between the house and the cohort, and we want to build lots of housing. At one level we want to be flexible so that different housing is available for different members of the community depending on needs at the time, because it is not efficient to have housing isolated for a very, very particular purpose, right. On the other hand we also want to be much better at responding to the needs and interests of different cohorts. So there are about 800 dwellings that are earmarked for Aboriginal community controlled organisations or for Aboriginal Victorians, and we are doing a huge amount in partnership with Aboriginal Housing Victoria to make sure that that is being delivered in a way that is consistent with self-determination and really driven by the Aboriginal community. There are at least 1000 homes that will be allocated to victim-survivors and in some cases perpetrators of family violence, the issue that Mr O'Brien was raising earlier.

There is also a very exciting thing which is meaning that we are working very closely with our colleagues in the Department of Health. Two-thousand properties as part of the Big Housing Build going to be allocated specifically to people experiencing significant mental health challenges. They are going to be allocated in concert with some support packages that the Department of Health will provide through their mental health service system. So what that means is that as the new housing comes on stream some proportion of that will be allocated to people who have significant mental health challenges alongside—kind of stapled to it, if that makes sense—a support package that helps them stabilise their needs and circumstances and get the kind of security and the stability of living in a home and making a home in a place. A few months ago we saw one of this kind of support facility opened in Geelong in partnership with the Haven Foundation. That is a great example. I think there were 24 apartments with some shared communal space, a very explicit support connection for people's mental illness challenges and a connection with the NDIS supports and funding packages, all in close collaboration with the mental health not-for-profit Mind Australia—so a great program and a good example of the kind of work that is being attempted through those 2000 new homes.

Mr MAAS: Terrific. Thank you. The questionnaire also makes reference to the ground lease model of housing. What is that? Would you be able to explain what that is and go into details around what that is delivering?

Ms PITCHER: You can.

Mr MAAS: You are both obviously very proud of this.

Ms PITCHER: Indeed, but there is somebody who spends more time on it each day than me.

Mr RIMMER: So the ground lease model is on three sites—in Flemington, Brighton and Prahran. It is delivering over 1100 new homes. It is a public-private partnership in structure, which means that we have now contracted with a consortium. The consortium is led by a not-for-profit entity.

Mr MAAS: So it is government-owned land, is that right?

Mr RIMMER: It is government-owned land. It remains government-owned land throughout the 40-year term of the contract, and at the end the land is returned to our use, as are all of the assets that are constructed on the land. So it is a very different way of managing the intersection between the community housing sector, private capital—for example, from superannuation funds and things like that—as well as the skill and capability of the private sector construction sector. So all of these things are coming together through a not-for-profit entity that runs that housing for 40 years. Then, at the end of 40 years, basically, they have to give it back to us and they have to give it back to us in in good condition. I mean, there is a more accurate description of that in the contract, a very finely described definition of what good condition means, but that is effectively the intent of it.

Some of this housing is social housing and will be available to people on the priority access list—for example, people who are victims-survivors of family violence; some of it is private market housing; some of it is actually specialist disability accommodation that will be funded by the NDIS; and all of it comes together in integrated communities that are safe, accessible and high amenity for everyone involved. So it is very exciting work.

We are working closely in partnership with the three local government areas involved, and those designs are now in a pretty advanced state of development. They have been submitted for planning permission and we are hoping to get underway for construction very shortly.

Mr MAAS: Thank you very much. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mr Hibbins.

Mr HIBBINS: Thanks, Chair. Thank you, Secretary and team, for appearing today. I will jump ahead a question and continue on the ground lease model. I have just got a few questions about that. In terms of the previous estimates hearings the minister outlined the total cost of the individual projects—\$135 million for Brighton, \$185 million for Prahran and so on. How much of that is direct government contribution and how much of that is a contribution of the consortium that is developing the projects?

Mr RIMMER: I am sorry, Mr Hibbins. I missed the most relevant—all of it is relevant, but the bit where you talked about specific numbers.

Mr HIBBINS: The numbers that the minister outlined were \$135 million for Brighton, \$185 million for Prahran and \$195 million for Flemington.

Mr RIMMER: So that is the construction cost of the project. That is our estimate of the construction cost. The way the project is structured is it is a 40-year agreement that includes the ongoing management of the properties—the maintenance, all of those kinds of things. So if you think about the overall cost of the project, some of that is met through private rents, some of that is met through social housing rents; some of it is met through, I do not know, maybe there is a coffee shop downstairs or something—I cannot even tell you the detail of that—and some of that is met through an annual service payment by the director of housing to the consortium in the same way that other PPPs work.

Mr HIBBINS: I am just trying to get the figure in terms of—okay, that is the costs of the construction. Who is paying for the construction? Is it the consortium or is it government, or is it a bit of both?

Mr RIMMER: The consortium pays for construction, and we pay for an annual service payment. There is one small exception to that, which is there is one part of the Flemington project where government has invested \$50 million up-front as part of the Big Housing Build to augment the Flemington contract and to get better value out of that arrangement.

Mr HIBBINS: Okay, but apart from that there is no up-front cost to government. Okay, thank you. I note there are a number of private developments as part of the Crown lease model. Will they be subject to council rates?

Mr RIMMER: Mr Hibbins, the government put a policy position in front of people in November last year that they want to have a discussion with local government about how rates for social housing will work in future, with a view to treating social housing more as a public benefit than a private or individual benefit. But these housing developments are obviously partly private market housing, and the government commitment around rates was really only relating to social housing.

Mr HIBBINS: So the private developments will be subject to rates?

Mr RIMMER: That is my belief.

Mr HIBBINS: Yes, okay. And on the social housing you are still having a discussion with local government. Okay, thank you. And just finally, obviously there is affordable housing that has been identified as part of the big build. Has any further consideration been given in terms of what is the actual definition of affordable housing?

Mr RIMMER: I was expecting you to ask this question, Mr Hibbins, and I am sorry that I am not going to be able to give you complete satisfaction on it. That is still something that we are working through. We do intend to consult and be more transparent about that at some point in time. Effectively we have been working on getting the construction underway. Some of the affordable housing is actually under construction at the moment—for example, in Ascot Vale or in Markham Avenue in Ashburton—but the exact policy settings are still something that will need to be talked about at some future point in time.

Mr HIBBINS: Okay, thank you. Can I ask now in terms of the response to the pandemic: obviously a lot of public housing tenants, particularly in the high-rise towers, were having to spend a lot of time at home—study

from home, work from home and what have you. Was any assistance or any thought given to increasing or supporting digital access for tenants in high-rise towers, given obviously there have been some reports of patchy internet and really struggling in that regard?

Mr RIMMER: Yes, so the answer to that, Mr Hibbins, is that this is something that we think about quite a lot. At various stages in the pandemic we have talked to Telstra and other providers about it. When you talk to tenants, when you talk to renters, there is just such a wide diversity of ways in which people now access the internet and their expectations about accessing the internet. All of our high-rise buildings are enabled for the NBN. Some tenants connect through the NBN, some do not. Most, many, have access to mobile phones, which now have pretty good data connections and which people hotspot. So maybe if you think about it through the lens of five or 10 years ago, you might have thought—and we have had this thought process ourselves—‘Maybe we should just put wi-fi in or something’. There are some technical challenges about the thickness of the concrete walls and whatever, because we have looked at that, but the reality is that there is just such a diversity of ways in which people get access to internet that it is quite hard to work out exactly how to improve that as an initiative, if I can put it like that.

Mr HIBBINS: Yes, okay. Thank you. Can I get now some just breakdown of some expenditure figures in 2020–21—feel free to take this on notice if you want—with regard to the total cost of security across public housing towers and, if it can be provided, breakdown versus per tower. The same with the total expenditure on cleaning, the same with the total expenditure on maintenance and then the same with the total expenditure on unit upgrades.

Mr RIMMER: Mr Hibbins, I can give you some of those numbers now. For cleaning in 2020–21, our total expenditure was \$76.19 million. Quite a lot of that was specifically related to COVID—enhanced initiatives and the kind of deep cleans that happened frequently throughout that period. On security, the amount for 2020–21 is \$43.76 million, and again about \$23.5 million of that is what you might describe as ordinary spend and about \$20 million of that is COVID-specific spend because we had, you know, a wide variety of people on at stages. We had nurses going door to door doing testing and vaccination and other things, so in some cases they had security arrangements with them. And so, yes, \$43.76 million was the total.

Mr HIBBINS: And then on maintenance?

Mr RIMMER: The maintenance number I do not think I have in front of me. Actually, hold on.

Ms PITCHER : We did of course have stimulus maintenance as well, which supplemented. The Victorian government had the \$2.7 billion statewide building works infrastructure program and within that we had \$498 million to fund the maintenance and upgrade, which was 23 000 social housing properties and 168 new social housing dwellings. Were you after maintenance just in the towers as opposed to across the—

Mr HIBBINS: Yes.

Mr RIMMER: Perhaps we should take that on notice.

Ms PITCHER : We can take that on notice, yes.

Mr HIBBINS: Okay. Thank you. Of that \$498 million you have just indicated, has that all been expended?

Mr RIMMER: No, Mr Hibbins, it has not all been expended. About \$440 million of that has been committed. A large amount has been expended, but some of it is still to happen. The original schedule was that it would complete by June next year. There are a couple of projects that we are aware of that will go beyond that. But the overwhelming majority will be committed and spent during that time horizon.

Mr HIBBINS: Okay. Thank you. Can I ask now about the build-to-rent program that was in the budget? I think it is 153. Can I ask: what are the prerequisites for participating in the build-to-rent program?

Mr RIMMER: Mr Hibbins, I think that might be in the Treasury portfolio.

Mr HIBBINS: Right. Okay. So there is no information?

Mr RIMMER: I am happy to try and help if you can give me a reference or something.

Mr HIBBINS: Well, it was in budget paper 3, page 153. But if that is—you are saying it is not under the—

Mr RIMMER: Yes, I think that is in the Treasury portfolio.

Mr HIBBINS: Okay. All right. Terrific. Thank you. Can I ask now about—budget paper 3, page 241—the housing assistance output, which is used for, amongst many things, accommodation for refugees. Can I ask: in terms of the youth refugees redesign report, which was commissioned in 2017, has that been used at all to inform any of the expenditure within youth refugees?

Mr RIMMER: I would have to take that on notice, I am afraid, Mr Hibbins.

Mr HIBBINS: Okay. All right. And then any further update in terms of any actions or outcomes that have come from that report, Obviously that had a lot of significant sector involvement there.

Mr RIMMER: If I can just say one thing, which is we have been talking a little bit about the Big Housing Build supporting specific cohorts; one cohort that we are pretty focused on, for obvious reasons, is young people. There is some excellent work that is being done through Argiri's team on, for example, the Home Stretch program and that kind of thing, which is one angle into the youth housing challenge, but there are other angles as well. So we hope to be able over the coming months to say a little bit more about a cohort-specific engagement resulting from the Big Housing Build that has some youth engagement.

Mr HIBBINS: Okay. Thank you. I have still got a bit of time. Can I ask now about page 26 of the questionnaire. There was \$1.2 million for LGBTI organisations—I think small businesses and other organisations. Are you able to outline which organisations that funding went to?

Ms PITCHER: I will just look for the detail, but while I am doing so, the focus on LGBTIQ businesses really was recognising that there were strong impacts happening throughout COVID, and it was recognised that the equality portfolio could make quite a contribution to help those businesses. I have got Acting Deputy Secretary Nicola Young here, who may have the actual organisations—or should we take it on notice? We can take on notice the exact detail. I can go through the types of things that were funded, but if you are after the exact—

Mr HIBBINS: Okay. Great. And because obviously that funding ended—I think it was just one year—whether there is any consideration for that funding to be continued.

Ms PITCHER: Well, certainly we are evaluating how the funding has been effective and what sort of response that we have had. Certainly the early indications are that it made a real difference across the portfolio, so it is something that we might be able to do more on. But some of the impacts were really focused on the lockdowns and what we could do in the lockdowns, so the settings would be different looking at 2021. But you would have seen that there are new investments in the portfolio focusing on Melbourne Pride 2021. Again, part of that funding came from that economic recovery grants program, so that is partially towards Melbourne Pride, coming, as well as Midsumma this year. We can come back to you with those exact details.

Mr HIBBINS: Terrific. Thank you. And then just finally, and I think we discussed this at the previous estimates hearings, around family violence, budget paper 3, page 64, had 'Family violence refuge responses'. It is in terms of culturally specific women's refuges in Victoria. Now, I understand New South Wales and Queensland do have culturally specific women's refuges, but we do not have them in Victoria. Are there any plans to fund or develop culturally sensitive women's refuges in Victoria?

Ms PITCHER: So it is an issue that we are aware has been done in different ways across Australia. I suppose the issue—and it goes to the points that my colleagues have been making—is in looking at where the need is and the best way to deliver for that need. I would not say we have got any specific plans to do that, but we are very engaged with the community, and certainly through the multicultural taskforce as well as through our partnership with SisterWorks we are quite engaged in looking at what the cohort are interested in. Was there anything you wanted to add, Eleri, to that answer? I will just hand over to Deputy Secretary Eleri—

Ms BUTLER: Thank you. Our multicultural work around family violence is very much guided by our Everybody Matters framework, as you are probably aware of. But our specialist family violence services are funded to do a range of work with victim-survivors in relation to supporting the community particularly,

including family violence case management work in the community and access to flexible support packages. We give specific funding, and you will have seen it in the annual report, to inTouch, for example, which provides a statewide specialist family violence response to different multicultural communities, particularly also for migrant and refugee women and their families, and also to the Australian Muslim Women's Centre for Human Rights. So there is a package of support that is available in the community around multicultural community needs. One of the things we have been doing particularly this year as well is building the capacity of the family violence service system to better respond to different multicultural community needs around family violence, including faith communities as well. So there is an allocation from the work that we did last year, in 2020–21, around COVID in multicultural communities. That has informed some of the budget spend that we have allocated for this year to maximise the capacity of the current specialist family violence service, which would include of course refuges in the community. So there is an allocation there as well, not only for victim-survivors but also for perpetrators of family violence as well. We also do perpetrator trials of behaviour change programs to meet multicultural or community needs

Mr HIBBINS: Okay. Terrific. Thank you. Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Mr Hibbins. Mrs McArthur.

Mrs McARTHUR: Thank you, Chair. Secretary, information obtained under freedom of information from the Australian Federal Police shows there were 30 reports of forced marriages in Victoria for the financial year 2020–21. What has the department done to reduce incidents of forced marriages and ensure all allegations are referred to the federal police?

Ms PITCHER: Thank you for your question. The department obviously is concerned about forced marriages and works closely with the federal police and also Victoria Police to investigate and to provide information where we can. Certainly our staff are trained across the department in MARAM, our multi-agency response framework. As well a very large number of our staff are mandatory reporters in a whole range of areas in which not just criminal but other incidents are reported. So certainly we work very closely with the police and we continue to raise awareness. We now have a mixture of portfolios, and this came up a little bit in the opening, where across the family of the department we have the women's portfolio, the family safety portfolio, the children and families portfolio, so coming together. I think something like forced marriages is an example, and we have many others, where our portfolio intersections give us probably more insights than we have been able to have before across government about where these issues sit. I would just say as well, as I think Ms Butler mentioned, we also have the multicultural portfolio in the department and throughout COVID we have had a real focus on the multicultural task force, not looking just at impacts on communities but also a family violence subcommittee that sat with that as well.

Mrs McARTHUR: So do you envisage the number of forced marriages is going to be reduced?

Ms PITCHER: Certainly that would be something probably that Victoria Police could speak to and the AFP in terms of their work. I would not want to traverse their areas. But certainly it would be something that we would share with them as a desire to lower the rate and be looking at zero incidents, and we will do all we can within our ability to provide the information and support to the authorities, both federal and state, to cut down the incidence of forced marriage.

Mrs McARTHUR: What is the current backlog of reports on children's safety waiting to be investigated?

Ms PITCHER: Just to clarify, are you thinking more in the frame of child protection reports or more generally?

Mrs McARTHUR: Yes, child protection.

Ms PITCHER: Janine, did you want to give some more detail on that?

Ms TOOMEY: Thank you, Secretary. All reports made to child protection are responded to immediately as part of the intake service, so if I am understanding you correctly, there is no backlog in relation to consideration of risk to children when a report is made. They are made in the front end of the service through our intake service.

Mrs McARTHUR: Okay. So every report is acted on immediately?

Ms TOOMEY: Every report is responded to immediately. Once a report is taken and a matter proceeds to investigation, it moves through from the intake function.

Mrs McARTHUR: How long would all that take?

Ms TOOMEY: How long would the investigation take?

Mrs McARTHUR: How long would all that process take?

Ms TOOMEY: Well, the phone calls are responded to immediately. The investigation—there are some performance measures associated with the investigation time line and certainly we keep a very close eye on investigations, but it is very hard to give an exact time given every investigation is very different depending on the needs of the child. Of course the risk is considered here also, so we prioritise those children assessed at greatest risk and of greatest need.

Mrs McARTHUR: So days? Weeks?

Ms TOOMEY: Some immediately, some within days.

Mrs McARTHUR: Right. Great. So would you say there has ever been an incident where a child was waiting for an investigation and the child's safety and wellbeing suffered?

The CHAIR: Do you mean within the financial year, Mrs McArthur?

Mrs McARTHUR: Yes, I do. In the 2020–21 financial year, under the area that we are investigating.

Ms TOOMEY: I can say that the framework that the service uses is to respond to those children assessed at intake as most at risk.

Mrs McARTHUR: Okay. The government lockdowns have deprived vulnerable children of valuable safety net touchpoints, where they were not able to attend school or kindergarten where they are visible to the society or the department. Isolated at-risk children were locked up effectively in unsafe homes. In the department's estimation how many at-risk children in Victoria, including those known to child protection, did this compromise?

Ms PITCHER: If I could just begin answering that.

Mrs McARTHUR: Thank you, Secretary.

Ms PITCHER: In terms of the lockdown—and we were very aware as a department across so many of our service areas that the lockdown just changed the way we needed to carry out our work, so, as you say, schools being closed, although we did as a government really make sure that schools were open to the most vulnerable, who could access them, but aware that that was not always going to be taken up as an offering. We certainly across all of our portfolios were looking at different ways to carry out our services. Child protection is a good example of where we had to—and I will not use the word that everyone dreads in COVID: 'pivot'—change the way we carried out some of our services. There were still face-to-face services in certain circumstances, and that did not stop during the pandemic, but in the interests of the safety of our practitioners as well as families we were looking at all of the different ways that we could carry out our work. That included phone call based and videoconferencing based, and we still had very strong and ongoing and enduring regional responses that bring in all of the different government and service agencies beyond government that look at child safety. Schools who are aware of issues, community groups, all of those other support services that are very much part of the service system were still very much in contact around our most vulnerable throughout the pandemic. It just meant that we had to do a very different range of ways of delivering and keeping children safe in Victoria.

Mrs McARTHUR: Okay. Thank you. Last year there were 65 deaths of children known to child protection. In this awful statistic of children dying while under the care of the state, according to the coroner, a significant number of those children known to child protection had inactive contact with child protection services at the

time of their death. Has the department investigated all those cases to ascertain why their cases were inactive at the time of death?

Ms PITCHER: Look, absolutely, if I could take that question just by beginning to say the death of any child is tragic, and I really want to offer my sympathy and the department's sympathy to all families who have lost a child. The thing is that when a child who was known to child protection in the previous 12 months dies, regardless of the circumstances, the services provided to them are reviewed by the Commission for Children and Young People. In the 2020–21 financial year we had 45 children who died who were known to child protection in that 12-month period prior, so a slightly different number than you have.

Mrs McARTHUR: I had that was for 2019–20 as well.

Ms PITCHER: Yes. So it is just important to note, and I do not want to take away from the various range of reasons, but some of the deaths resulted from things like premature birth, sudden infant death syndrome and pre-existing medical conditions, and there are also incidents of accidents and car accidents that capture in that number. Now, without going into individual instances of the child to those, it is just I think worth the broader understanding that there is a range of causation factors involved in those deaths. We definitely look at patterns, though, across years, and the biggest increase in the cause of death was sudden unexpected death in infancy and sudden infant death. For example, two children, sadly, died from that cause in 2019–20, and that was up to eight in 2020–21. So we do look at those patterns. Similarly, in eight of the 45 deaths child protection had received a report about the child at the time of injury or illness that led to their death, and these children were not previously known to child protection. So it was at the time of their passing, sadly, that child—

Mrs McARTHUR: So what you are telling me really is it was not in your bailiwick, it was not anything to do with your responsibility really.

Ms PITCHER: Or sadly at that moment in time child protection had not heard of them until they passed, so yes, in eight of the 45. And very sadly I will note that four of the deaths were because of suicide, and we are looking into those, and that is something across the whole service system I think is a very sad statistic and something for government agencies and beyond to focus on.

Mrs McARTHUR: Terrible. The growth of children in out-of-home care in Victoria is the fastest in the nation. How many children in Victoria were in out-of-home care by placement as of 30 September? You may want to take it on notice.

Ms PITCHER: 30 September?

Mrs McARTHUR: Yes.

Ms PITCHER: In the reporting year?

Mrs McARTHUR: In the reporting year.

Ms PITCHER: Sure. I think we will need to take that on notice.

Mrs McARTHUR: That is fine. Okay, thank you. It was reported that last year nearly 600 foster carers left the system. How many new foster carers does the department estimate are required to sign up right now to meet the demand?

Ms PITCHER: I will talk a little bit about foster carers and then pass to my colleague.

The CHAIR: Sorry to interrupt you, Secretary, but are we talking about right now, Mrs McArthur, or are we talking about the financial year 2020–21?

Mr NEWBURY: She said last year. She said the words 'last year'.

The CHAIR: Sorry, Mr Newbury, could you please refrain from interrupting. The question expressly said 'right now' and I was qualifying—

Mr NEWBURY: She said last year.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, could you please stop interrupting.

Mr Newbury interjected.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, I am trying to clarify the member's question. I cannot do—

Mr Newbury interjected.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, I cannot do that while you are interrupting me.

Mrs McARTHUR: Chair, please let me help you.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

Mrs McARTHUR: It was reported that last year nearly 600 foster carers left the system.

Ms PITCHER: I just wanted to say that one of the things we are continuing to want to do is always attract new foster carers to our system, not just because—

Mrs McARTHUR: How many have been recruited as a result of your actions in the last financial year—

Mr ALISANDRATOS: I can jump in—

Mrs McARTHUR: that we might expect to see in the new financial year? How about that?

Mr ALISANDRATOS: Mrs McArthur, we have been funding a program called Fostering Connections, which is operated by the centre for excellence in child and family services. That program is about targeting recruitment activity to try and build up our carer base in foster care. It is fair to say that across the nation we have lots of challenges in recruiting foster carers. Every jurisdiction faces those challenges, as do we. But we have significant investment in trying to build up the numbers. Of course the majority of our carer base and children in care are placed in kinship care arrangements. So 75 per cent of children in out-of-home care are with family, and that is our preferred placement option because we want to keep children connected with their families. That is the best approach in terms of how we look after children.

Mrs McARTHUR: If it is the safest way.

Mr ALISANDRATOS: Sorry?

Mrs McARTHUR: If it is the safest way.

Mr ALISANDRATOS: Absolutely, and always under very, very safe conditions and through thorough assessments to ensure that those children are, effectively—

Mrs McARTHUR: How many children and babies would be awaiting foster care?

Mr ALISANDRATOS: Well, no-one is awaiting because what we do is always prioritise children to be placed with family. Our preferred approach is to secure family-based care through grandparents, aunts, uncles and the broader social network. That is where we put most of our focus. We are very proud of the work that we have done in really building up our kinship care models and providing additional support. That is not to say we are not interested and not continuing our efforts to ensure that we build up our home-based care and our foster care capacity, but it is a much more challenging space in terms of recruiting foster carers.

Mrs McARTHUR: Thank you so much. Secretary, perhaps you could help me out with the big build.

Ms PITCHER: Yes.

Mrs McARTHUR: Local government has extraordinarily prescribed consultation processes, as laid down by government. They are very onerous, and in rural communities they are especially onerous. And your big build program of course does not involve any consultation with local governments effectively. Is that appropriate, do you think?

Ms PITCHER: Well, I think we would contend that there is a lot of consultation with local government and indeed a lot of partnership with local government on the big build, and in fact we have got very many local governments who are very keen to partner with us on the big build. In fact it is one of the things I think we were speaking about earlier, because not just—

Mrs McARTHUR: In small local municipalities you have got very extensive local consultation with councils, are you assuring me?

Ms PITCHER: Every area has a consultative committee that has its structures. I certainly know that across social media platforms, a very large variety of them, community meetings, consultations are called and held. Mr Rimmer may be able to give us some specific examples. And even though COVID really restricted a lot of things that we would have previously done in the face-to-face community hall style, we actually found that larger numbers, in many instances, were able to attend online meetings that we held.

Mrs McARTHUR: We have all come to love Zoom.

Ms PITCHER: Exactly, And so, you know, there is—

A member: Or despise it.

Mrs McARTHUR: Correct.

Ms PITCHER: Yes.

Mrs McARTHUR: So can you also tell me: in small local communities would you be first going to local builders and suppliers to do the big build, or do you have prescribed tenderers with your social procurement policy paramount?

Mr RIMMER: I will answer that and then perhaps go back to the planning reforms. Some of the Big Housing Build is procured by us directly. Some of it is procured indirectly through the community housing sector, and they will use a range of procurement pathways that best meet the needs of their organisations, whether that be Haven; Home, Safe or Housing Choices Australia or Women's Property Initiatives. For construction that we are doing, we use a large number of builders. There are something in the order of—I will be able to tell you the exact number of builders that we are using. We have got six—

Mrs McARTHUR: Do you prioritise local builders?

Mr RIMMER: We prioritise value for money, to be frank, but we have about 40 builders engaged right across regional Victoria. I think logic tells you that that probably means some of them are smaller and, you know, there is—

Mrs McARTHUR: And they would have to subscribe to the social procurement policy?

Mr RIMMER: They would have to subscribe to different elements of it. Some of the social procurement arrangements differ depending on the value of the project. But, for example, our smallest construction contract with one builder is just for two houses. I have never heard of, frankly, Figurehead Construction. I am sure they are a fine company, but we are procuring five houses through them, and I assume that they are a relatively small builder or developer, but that might be my own ignorance.

A key part of the regional spend is to make sure that it is very widely distributed. This is not just a program for Bendigo and Ballarat, if I can put it like that, much as they are wonderful places. This is a program that is really going to have impact right across a whole range of smaller towns, and villages in fact. I know you have quite a lot to do with Camperdown. You are aware of a particular project there, for example.

Mrs McARTHUR: Very aware of it. So are the community.

Mr RIMMER: That is an example of the fact that we are trying to work in towns like Camperdown as well as in metropolitan Melbourne.

Mrs McARTHUR: It has not been—

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mrs McArthur. Your time has expired. As we are halfway through the proceedings, we might take a 10-minute break and resume at 3.05. Thank you.

I declare back open these hearings of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee, and the call is with Ms Richards.

Ms RICHARDS: Thank you, Secretary, and all your officials for the time here this afternoon and also for the work, especially in the last 20 months or so. I would like to explore the response to family violence during COVID. In particular in the questionnaire it has been reported that additional funding of \$8.5 million in the form of a Treasurer's advance was provided in response to COVID-19 for housing assistance. I am interested in gaining some insights into how this funding has been put towards supporting victim-survivors of family violence.

Ms PITCHER: Thank you for your question. I will open and then hand to the Chief Executive of Family Safety Victoria, who has got a great deal of information on this topic. Sadly, as we have talked about already a bit today, we have had a strong focus on family violence throughout COVID-19 and it has been a real priority for us. That is because of our concern and recognising that the challenges of social distancing, lockdowns and other areas have really impacted on families and on the way that we can do our work with people in need. We have really had to change the way particularly a range of specialist family violence agencies and others can carry out their work. There has been lots of great innovation in that, but it has been under challenging and stressful circumstances, so we are really proud to support the sector and all of our partners in this but we really recognise many of the challenges.

One of the things we particularly focused on was online platforms to access services, using social media to raise community awareness of all of our available services and offerings, recognising that this was a way to reach more people than ever given the way people were using online services more in COVID. In April 2020, so really just at the early stages of the pandemic, we announced an investment of \$40.2 million over two years for crisis accommodation and supports for people experiencing family violence, and we included \$20.2 million to help Victorian family violence and sexual assault services adapt their service delivery and meet increased demand during the COVID pandemic, so both the adaptation of how they were doing their work but also recognising that there was a lot more to do in different ways.

We then had an additional \$8.5 million for housing assistance during COVID, and we have talked a bit about housing today and the different realms that were needed. In 2021 more than \$20 million was invested to keep more family violence victim-survivors safe in their own homes. There was \$8.5 million to enable perpetrators to leave the home and move into short or longer term accommodation—so a whole range of those areas. But I just wonder if Eleri would like to give more detail.

Ms BUTLER: Thank you. Just in relation to the specifics of your question as well, that part, as the Secretary mentioned, links to the suite of investments that have been made around keeping victim-survivors safe in their own homes. But there was a really innovative part to that as well, which was also about keeping perpetrators in sight and looking at accommodation options for perpetrators, because just before that announcement was made, actually, we know that referrals to men's referral services had increased at that time and we also know that there was increased risk for women and children, particularly given the restrictions and being in much closer contact with perpetrators, as they were at the time. The budget in particular provided intervention and behaviour change work for those who were using violence in the home. It included, for example, funding to No to Violence to expand their men's referral service work—there was an uplift there—and also to uplift Aboriginal community controlled organisations to deliver culturally safe responses to people who use violence. It also increased funding to family violence services in Aboriginal community controlled organisations.

But the funding to enable perpetrators to leave the home and move into short- to medium-term accommodation was one of the significant I think innovations that we invested in at this time, because the funding to enable perpetrators to leave home and move into that accommodation was not only a housing solution but it was accompanied by interventions and behaviour change work with the perpetrators. That was really, really important, because too often, as I am sure we all know, victim-survivors are forced to leave their homes. Sometimes they need to because it is a crisis, but having options available to look at safeguarding them in their own homes with their children enables them to not lose connection with family, friends and other social settings—work, education and so on—so it is much less disruptive for them.

One of the things that that program was particularly wanting to deliver was to remove housing instability as a barrier to addressing violent behaviours and changing violent behaviours while also, as I said, keeping victim-survivors safe. So part of that money introduced the Perpetrator Accommodation and Support Service, which is a crisis service, and it also then was used to develop the foundations of a medium-term perpetrator accommodation service. These were available and provided to people who used violence—who had been required to leave their home for family violence, for example, through a protection order—and part of that requirement and part of the deal of the accommodation bit I guess was also engaging in behaviour change work. The evaluation that we did of the crisis service really showed that it actually in the short term provided victim-survivors and their children with increased safety at that point in time, and their ability to access support services—albeit adjusted, as was described, online and in other ways—was maximised so their safety was enhanced.

Ms RICHARDS: Thanks for that. I am really interested in that spending on perpetrators and in exploring that a little bit further. I am interested perhaps in a little bit more specific detail about how the funding was used for interventions for perpetrators and to explore a little bit more the benefits of the approach to interventions for perpetrators.

Ms BUTLER: Well, as I said, with the perpetrator crisis accommodation project there were a couple of options that we invested in. Perpetrators with crisis accommodation for up to two weeks was one of the options, where they were provided with wraparound interventions and support to address immediate concerns and there was a focus on linking perpetrators into services to address their offending behaviour, whether they were known to the police or not, in relation to changing their behaviour. As part of that pilot 355 men in fact were accommodated and supported in that program as of September this year. But it started back in 2020–21, and that was really successful because it also had statewide reach. From September 2020 to March 2021 two-thirds of the perpetrators or clients were located in metro Melbourne and 34 per cent were in regional Victoria, particularly 19 per cent in the north-east. So it was a good span because of the partnership that we had with No to Violence and with their providers—their intervention and accommodation providers. That was accompanied by and fed into the medium-term perpetrator accommodation service, which is a longer term initiative. It is a 12-month pilot case management response to perpetrators that includes accommodation support, and this is really innovative. This rarely happens in countries across the world, you know, in other areas, so I think it is a really good thing to keep an eye on, which is why we were really interested in evaluating it. So while we are supporting perpetrators to address their behaviour, the men's service as well provides them with the accommodation. I think it was 54 people that we accommodated and supported in that 12-month period. That was across particular areas as well for the pilot—that was in the Central Highlands, Loddon and north-east Melbourne—and each pilot site is led by an experienced perpetrator intervention service, a specialist family violence service, partnering with a local housing provider. And we have also got in development as well an Aboriginal-led pilot project as part of that, informed by that learning but very much led by Aboriginal communities.

Obviously that is one particular really innovative initiative, but it builds on the other investments from 2020–21. The \$10.7 million in that budget was going towards, for example, the Caring Dads program, which is an evidence-based program, again a first in Australia—globally evidence based. We know it has a really strong impact, but it helps fathers who have used violence to improve their relationships with their children and also helps them control their abusive—and prevent their violent behaviour. The investment also contributed to increased brokerage funding to help support services' work with perpetrators in the community through providing case management support to give those things that people often need—the practical assistance to stabilise the family situation or their relationship or to provide them with support to engage with the programs as well—as well as with the one-to-one work. Programs are not right and are not available for everybody, so it is really important to have that one-to-one intervention in the community, and that case management assists people as well with getting people ready for groups if they are not ready for that sort of group intervention.

There is a range of initiatives, which I probably have not got time to talk about here, but that is also very much supported by the Orange Door network that we have across the state and the significant investment that has been put into the development of the central information point, the CIP, which brings together for frontline workers—for the people working with perpetrators and with the family—the information from a range of agencies to look at their risk in the community, to look at their patterns of behaviour of abuse and to look at how we can maximise safety for victim-survivors and at the same time reduce and prevent the violent behaviour and put alternatives in place for them. That is why the accommodation is really a strong part of that.

You asked about the benefit and how we know it works. We did an evaluation, as I mentioned, of the crisis support service. Obviously it is a time-limited pilot which we are developing and building on, and the evaluation showed really positive feedback from the people who engaged with it, the men who were supported and accommodated through the program. Given it was a short-term intensive piece of work, there was strong engagement from the evaluation. We also know that brokerage funding and the sort of case management funding was really helpful as part of that evaluation and particularly from an intervention perspective, because all of our work around perpetrator interventions, perpetrator accountability, is about keeping victim-survivors safe in communities. So we also know that the women and children involved in those pilots particularly experienced increased levels of safety and stability around that time to enable them to access help and support. There are other evaluations I could go into, subject to time, around Caring Dads, brokerage and other things, but there are strong evaluations to show that they work—and particularly the Caring Dads program. It is globally evidence based. It has been developed for the first time in Victoria, in Australia. We have been investing in it for the last couple of years, and it has now been rolled out as a result of the investment in 2020 across other areas across the state.

Ms RICHARDS: They sound like world-leading interventions.

Ms BUTLER: Yes, I would say so.

Ms RICHARDS: I would be interested in hearing about that all day, but I do need to move on. I am interested in understanding what lessons the department has had through COVID-19 in relation to how we might better target services and improve access for vulnerable women.

Ms PITCHER: I might take that question. Thank you. Gender equality is a really important part of what our department is focused on, and as I mentioned earlier, the coming together of the Fairer Victoria portfolios, which include the women's portfolio as well as Family Safety Victoria and the office for the prevention of violence just means that we have actually got a really good cross-section of ways of looking at equality and of the different ranges that women's participation, both economic and social, can be effected. So in terms of gender equality we have had a whole range of focus areas that we kept on very strongly focusing on throughout COVID as much as we could, recognising that there were a lot of different challenges for women's economic and social participation.

We had the really strong cornerstone of, right back from December 2016, the *Safe and Strong: A Victorian Gender Equality Strategy* that has been guiding our work and really sets the ambition of living in a safe and equal society, women having equal power, resources and opportunities and being treated with dignity, respect and fairness. So this strategy has been running along and is actually one of the areas that we are looking to continue and build upon in the years to come. So in terms of some of the work that we did throughout the past year, we had encouragement for both industry and community to engage with us on *Safe and Strong*, and \$100 000 was allocated in the budget for the Gender Equality in Advertising project on which we worked with Women's Health Victoria to really change the way that we think about women and equality in the way that women often are projected in advertising. We also had funding that supported the shEqual campaign, which was gender equity training for the advertising industry, and the development of a gender equity charter. Women's Health Victoria received \$150 000 for this project in 2020–21, with an additional \$50 000 from the women's budget.

We also really focused on women's workforce participation. One of the ways that we really focused was looking at the areas that have been traditionally male dominated. They are very obvious when you think about them, but they are really important in where we spend a lot of money, both as a government and also a society—so women in construction strategy, women in transport and the building equality policy. In all of these areas we are really looking at, again, how we take the money that we are spending as government and make sure that both our procurement but also our expenditure efforts make the biggest impact that we can. So in September 2020–21—and this is leading on from this year—we announced the \$10 000 Women in Apprenticeships fund to remove barriers for women wanting to be an apprentice in those areas and have had a lot of focus in that time.

You did mention COVID particularly, and I do just want to call attention to that one of the areas we really know across the community is people's mental health and how mental health was affected during so many different parts of the pandemic. So to support frontline mental health care during COVID-19 we had

12 women's health services each receive additional funding—around \$50 000—looking at women's mental health, wellbeing and social connectedness throughout that year. This came together as part of the Victorian government's \$59.4 million Keeping Victorians Connected and Supported mental health and wellbeing coronavirus response package. I will leave it there.

Ms RICHARDS: I was just going to say I have only got a tiny bit of time left.

Ms PITCHER: Sorry, yes.

Ms RICHARDS: I really did want to get to a final question I have, and I am conscious of the time. What other crisis accommodation options exist for women who experience violence, aside from refuges? I think it is important for us to get some evidence about where we go.

Ms PITCHER: Sure. And I am conscious—if the time does not permit us, we can provide some more on notice as well. I think today we have talked a bit about refuges, and that has been evidence that my two colleagues have talked about as well. The other area that we have talked about and that was particularly important and continues to be important during COVID has been hotel accommodation, so From Homelessness to a Home and others have been really looking at people using hotels. And one of the things obviously was that during COVID those hotels were not being able to be used in the way they traditionally were. So that again provided us new accommodation options. We have got a range of different providers across both the housing sector and homelessness sector and the family violence sector who do overlap and provide lots of mutual support for each other, and there are options they are looking at both in the traditional support but also really in providing people with stable long-term homes that we know has greater outcomes for people rather than the short-term refuge options, which we really try and focus as a transitional means. But happy to take more on notice.

Ms RICHARDS: Thank you so much.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Richards. Mr Limbrick.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you, Chair, and I thank you all for appearing today. I just wanted to start with some questions around the recommendations from the Ombudsman's report into the housing tower lockdown on Alfred Street. Although the government rejected some of the recommendations, they did accept some, which I believe are being handled by your department. I was wondering if you could let me know what happened during the last financial year around identifying all the high-risk accommodation settings. I think it was:

Identify all sensitive and high-risk accommodation settings administered by the ... Government and invest in them to ensure appropriate ... outbreak prevention, preparation ...

What work has been done on that?

Ms PITCHER: Great. Thank you for your question. You will just see there is a little bit of movement at the table. Just to introduce that, Brigid Monagle is currently the Acting Deputy Secretary who is in charge of our recovery and relief part of COVID. But just to speak about the high-risk accommodation response, because it really is something that takes the setting of where the community was living but looked at their risk factors, partially because of their setting but also because of the different experiences they might be having. We particularly focused in high-rise towers as one setting, but supported residential services is another setting, low-rise public accommodation is another, and supported group homes both in disability and of course, as we have talked about, out-of-home care and residential services for our young people. So by having that sort of holistic look that our department was able to have about all of those high-risk accommodation settings, all of which we have either a responsibility to run or fund or regulate, we were able to look at the people within those settings and then assess their risk factors. So it was very multifaceted, if you like, looking both at the risk to individuals and the risk to the settings.

The things that we were really focused on were both understanding the risk of COVID if COVID entered some of the settings, and that has been something obviously that has been enduring, but particularly over this past financial year looking at the way we could minimise risk and also support people before COVID or without COVID in their world but to give them strength and confidence going forward. The vaccination program was a really important part of that, and I am really proud to talk about how many people across our high-risk settings

were vaccinated, really often with intensive work and support, which for most of the financial year, I think, has been tracking at higher than the state rate of vaccination, which I think is really—

Mr LIMBRICK: What do you mean by ‘intensive work and support’, because the government has been using coercive mechanisms for this and I am wondering what sorts of mechanisms are you talking about here.

Ms PITCHER: So I am talking about the difference between whether someone chose to have a vaccine and travelled down to a vaccination centre at the exhibition building as opposed to us recognising that transport and travel can be a challenge for people so coming to the area that they were either familiar with in a cultural setting or indeed was where they were living, so setting up some vaccination hubs around all of the public housing towers so that people did not have to travel a great distance to get vaccinated. Certainly supporting people with disabilities and their workers to get vaccinated was something that, while the commonwealth has most responsibility for disability now with the changes, we certainly knew that there was a lot of work we could do as a state to make sure that Victoria had as many people in disability settings vaccinated as possible, so we really took on an extra responsibility, I guess, to make sure that there was access for people. Even things like the drive-through vaccination facilities, which were not initially designed to be all about disability, were a quick learning for us that for some people with disability the actual ability to stay in a car and have their vaccination enabled them much more confidence.

Mr LIMBRICK: One other thing that came out of that inquiry—now, this was one of the recommendations that I was disappointed that the government did not take up—was to amend the legislation to ensure that people detained under emergency powers have the right to fresh air and exercise. Although the legislation was not amended to enable that, was there any thinking done to ensure that those people, if they were going to be detained again, could actually get fresh air and exercise? Because this was one of the criticisms that the Ombudsman came up with.

Ms PITCHER: I do not mean to pass this on, but the work that hotel quarantine Victoria did around all of the settings and the way that they supported people in hotel quarantine sits with my colleague in the justice portfolio. So while obviously we work in partnership with them, the detention and holding of people for their COVID period and their quarantine period really sits with hotel quarantine Victoria.

Mr LIMBRICK: But it is related to the design of the building and the layout of the building, because if you have got a house with a backyard, you can easily get fresh air and exercise, but if you are in a high-rise tower, there needs to be some sort of way of getting people in and out to do that.

Ms PITCHER: Yes, sure. But I suppose the question around detaining people is very much for hotel quarantine Victoria. This goes to people’s confidence about where they live, because it is their home and we do not want them to feel unsafe. So certainly throughout the response, when we knew that we had cases in high-risk settings, we did a lot of work with Health colleagues to understand the risk factors of COVID spread, and we have gained more and more understanding about the use of air scrubbers and other techniques to be able to keep places safe. We also had very strong testing regimes, and again that was sometimes door to door, so that we were really able to understand the way that COVID was spreading or indeed not spreading in some of our settings. And that really helped give people confidence too to understand that we were really focused on safety, on minimising COVID spread and on ensuring that people were able to access community life.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you. On to a separate topic around NDIS issues, I think around late 2019 my colleague and I were made aware of issues around border communities and some of the issues around NDIS service providers wanting to provide services across borders. There were problems with recognition of credentials and authorisations and things like this. I think we brought it up in Parliament at the time, and the government said, ‘Yes, we’re aware of this and we’re working on it’. Was there any work done on sort of harmonising things with other states so that these sorts of issues were less of a problem during the financial year?

Ms PITCHER: Look, my colleague may be able to give more detail, but I would say the thing that really was strong for us throughout COVID was working with the commonwealth, recognising their role in running the NDIS system. So I guess we considered ourselves helpful advocates who provide the commonwealth with information. Certainly we were able to give lots of examples about some of the challenges that we have had in staffing different services, both in aged care and disability, that—

Mr LIMBRICK: The feedback that we got was that, yes, there was this problem, because you have got the New South Wales jurisdiction, Victoria and federal, and it is a problem because some of the certifications have stayed and some of the things are federal. It is a bit of a mess, and they were trying to harmonise it. I think that was the word they used.

Ms PITCHER: Yes. I mean, to be honest, I think it sits in another portfolio—in part with the cross-border commissioner. But I think during COVID the ability to travel across the border was probably almost the predominant problem. So some of the harmonisation, I think, has really probably made some good progress throughout the NDIS, but the COVID border situation probably provided a whole set of new challenges. Certainly for us as a department staffing many of our border communities, we were really aware of the different ways people live and work across borders that they are used to being more fluid. So there has been great cooperation, but it was really quite a big challenge.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you. I am changing topics pretty quick here, but that is all right. On page 206 of budget paper 3, I just wanted to maybe get a bit more insight into a few of these performance measures. The number of clients assisted to address and prevent homelessness, the actual was a lot lower than the target, about 12 000 less than the target approximately, and the description or the note there says it was lower due to lower-than-anticipated demand for homelessness services during the pandemic. What was the reason that the demand for those services was lower than anticipated?

Mr RIMMER: Mr Limbrick, the entire homelessness service system was in a degree of chaos—effective and trying-to-assist chaos, but the COVID pandemic was very difficult for this sector. A lot of resource and effort was shifted out of the normal system and into supporting people in hotels, and so that had both a supply and a demand effect. It meant that from time to time there were fewer people available in the normal access point system to support people, but it also meant that more people were actually safe and secure and not needing that support, because they were in hotels. At various different times over the last 12 or 15 months there have been I think 22 500 separate hotel stays by families, and so you can see from that that that number is kind of—

Mr LIMBRICK: So that does not come under this number?

Mr RIMMER: Yes. That kind of does not trigger the right counting rule in the BP3 papers.

Mr LIMBRICK: Okay. So if I am hearing you right, what you are saying is that the demand here is lower because the demand is being picked up by the hotel thing, which is not part of this?

Mr RIMMER: Yes. That is my understanding.

Mr LIMBRICK: Okay. That makes sense.

Ms PITCHER: And also, just to say, I think another factor was that different things were happening in COVID as well. JobSeeker was continued. We had an eviction moratorium in the state. So of these drivers that can often change that very vivid and active rate of homelessness in and out, some were really changed. So the JobSeeker one and certainly the eviction moratorium were ones that we cannot compare to any other year but were particularly strange in COVID.

Mr LIMBRICK: Yes. Understood. And also on page 207 there is another statistic there, which was quite concerning when I saw it. So the number of nights of refuge accommodation provided to victims of family violence was very much lower than the target. I think it was 42 900 versus 54 000 target, and the target for the next financial year is predicted to go back up to 54 000. So that would seem to indicate that there was an underlying demand for these services that you would have expected that could not be met, and the reason given in the note here is: ‘due to the impact of face-to-face services’. Is that a fair description: that there probably was demand that could not be met during this time? Is that what we are talking about here? Like, what is the reason for this to be so much lower than the target?

Ms PITCHER: We think it is from a whole range of different push and pull factors, and I am happy for colleagues to jump in with a bit more detail. But obviously less people were out in the community, less people were in the places where they are often supported to seek help or make opportunities for them to make a change

in their circumstance and we certainly recognise and expect that there are potentially a range of people who throughout COVID did not access services that we expect that service to provide.

Mr LIMBRICK: There are a lot in their homes.

Ms PITCHER: That is right. And so we have been both advertising and doing all of the social media and other things we talked about to try and encourage people to still seek out services and even trying to make ways that people could do that in a safe way, recognising that they are in their home and that those options were limited. As well as that, some of the other services that were not explicitly about family violence were able to be accessed by people. So if they were a primary close contact or if they were in COVID, we were able to support people into accommodation or the hotel quarantine options, and many times there was an overlap of people's—

Mr LIMBRICK: What you mean 'hotel quarantine options'?

Ms PITCHER: Certainly during a number of the lockdowns if someone was a primary or close contact—

Mr LIMBRICK: Oh, right.

Ms PITCHER: or if they were COVID, we were able to support them into those accommodations, and in a number of instances we did not move the whole family. Certainly in some of those instances it was because we understood violence or other parts were impacting on that.

Mr LIMBRICK: So part of the family would go into quarantine and part would stay home?

Ms PITCHER: Yes.

Mr LIMBRICK: Right.

Ms PITCHER: I would not want to mislead, but we did that for some reasons around COVID spread as well. Delta, though, when we were in that phase, usually the whole family was affected, but there were times when we housed—let us just say I can think of a couple of instances where we housed a mother and children separately from—

Mr LIMBRICK: And that would not be picked up in this because that is not a refuge, it is part of quarantine? Right.

Ms PITCHER: Correct. A really different option, yes.

Mr LIMBRICK: Again, this is similar to what we were talking about where some of that demand would be met through other services which are unique during that period. It is not going to be—yes, all right. That makes sense as well. Similarly, the number of clients assisted to address and prevent homelessness due to family violence again was much lower than the target—52 000 versus 62 000. What is the story here? Is this a similar sort of story as well?

Ms PITCHER: Certainly with homelessness it is even more explicit because we had so many—in fact as many as we could—housed in hotels and so the ability to be able to support people in that hotel program meant that we really had so many different services being able to access that cohort. So compared to a year where various homelessness clients are living in a range of sometimes suboptimal accommodation or no accommodation, we had really such a huge percentage of that cohort living under our care in various hotels and other accommodation, so it is a really different dynamic for us.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you. Just quickly, in the very short time I have got left, if we have had these very large reductions in some of these metrics, which have been shifted to other areas, why was there not a corresponding drop in the expenditure as well, because you would not have to fund these things—for example, refuges and things—if there were 12 000 less nights of accommodation. Why was there not a corresponding drop? Is that because a lot of these costs are fixed costs or—

Ms PITCHER: Probably the vast majority of that is there are fixed costs, but also we asked services, our partners, to provide different services. So just as we were moving the way we did face to face to online, our

services were providing their wraparound support in a really different way. So many of our service sector supported people in our hotels rather than in the refuges or provided different ranges. I mean, it is a complex answer but that explains most of the variation.

Mr LIMBRICK: Yes. Okay, thank you very much. I do not think I have got much time left, so cheers.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Limbrick. Ms Taylor.

Ms TAYLOR: Secretary and department officials, thanks for appearing today. I think it would be helpful for the committee to explore more about the community employment connectors so if I can refer you please to budget paper 3, page 121, noting that multicultural communities are among the most severely impacted by COVID-induced economic downturn and research from previous downturns has demonstrated the importance of governments acting swiftly to support the most vulnerable in times of economic stress. On that note, can you outline how the community employment connectors program and funding is supporting CALD Victorians into secure employment?

Ms PITCHER: Thank you so much for your question, and I think it really does go, I guess, to the theme of so much of today's PAEC, which has been around the different ways that our vulnerable communities have been affected throughout the COVID pandemic. We are certainly really aware that our culturally and linguistically diverse communities were probably amongst the hardest hit by not just the economic downturn but also a lot of the social settings that affected all of us in Victoria. So many of our program responses and our various community responses have been working closely with different community groups to actually understand what different communities have been going through and working out the diverse ways that we could assist. But one of the things that was very, I suppose, common across so many communities was the economic impacts that were hurting people and how job readiness and lack of employment networks, even visa status, were impacting as well as the COVID pandemic, so there were just these multiplier effects. We really felt that there were additional stresses, and these were coming through in the CALD task force that we set up for COVID that was really gathering community responses and bringing them to government and other providers.

I think you mentioned the community employment connectors. These were a really important part of the response and one of the ways that we really tried to think differently about how we worked with communities. In the 2020–21 budget we provided \$8.26 million over the two years—so 4.11 and then 4.15—to employ community connectors. The great part about these community employment connectors is they are providing both culturally responsive and individualised support—so really working one on one with people—for disadvantaged CALD jobseekers to navigate and connect them with employment and with training, so we were not looking just at the jobs but also the training part. But of course in itself it was an employment program that provided people the opportunity to become a community employment connector. It recognised cultural connection, language abilities and other things as part of the employment process for the connectors themselves. We had 34 community employment connectors, 27 FTE in total, funded in 11 host organisations across Victoria, and we really looked at the concentration and need, often depending on where COVID was at that time, but also the impacts within communities. They were mainly hosted by an organisation within our strategic partnerships program—it is a long-existing program that the department supports—giving the individuals significant experience, expertise and networks themselves but also the ability to bring their connection in for the communities that they were serving.

We also had the CECs network with peers through Jobs Victoria advocates and the community of practice, bringing together community knowledge, and really hoping that this model might be able to continue in ways beyond that immediate COVID effect, recognising the different interface that these people have been able to bring for community.

Ms TAYLOR: Very good. And on that note, how did you ensure the investment made via the community employment connectors program was directed and assigned to support communities that need it most? I can see it was quite tailored and culturally sensitive, but just making sure it really did get to those who needed it most.

Ms PITCHER: I will answer a bit and then I might hand to my colleague. One of the things I particularly mentioned was the CALD COVID task force, or the multicultural task force, that government established that had a wide range of representatives on it and was admirably chaired by our multicultural commissioner in Viv.

What the CALD task force managed to do was bring a diversity of voices to the table that really helped describe the need and the range of where impacts were happening. So it was really a dynamic way of gathering where issues were happening. It was a really quick way to be able to hold a host of different online meetings or forums but also bring back a sort of comparator of need and disadvantage that was occurring across communities. But I will hand to Nicola Young to give a bit more detail about the specifics.

Ms YOUNG: Thank you, Ms Taylor, for the question. In terms of the community engagement connectors, one of the strengths of the program was that they really complemented the investment in Jobs Victoria and particularly in the Jobs Victoria advocates, really working hand in glove with those advocates to identify multicultural and CALD jobseekers and really break down those employment barriers and build their capacity and knowledge, particularly of culturally and linguistically diverse organisations, to provide employment supports. Part of how we also ensured that the supports were provided where needed was really, as the Secretary said, the partnering through the strategic partnerships program. This is a longstanding program that has been working across Victoria, particularly in communities with high concentrations of people born overseas and who need additional support, particularly from newly arrived communities. Working with that existing network of multicultural supports is how we ensured that we were getting to communities who need it.

Ms TAYLOR: I am just interested to explore a little bit further some other government employment programs that were complementing this program, such as the government's free TAFE program, for instance, and how that is sort of interweaved in this situation.

Ms YOUNG: Are you asking what was the specific connection between free TAFE and this program?

Ms TAYLOR: Well, yes. I suppose what I am trying to get to is if you could elaborate on how the community connectors program complements or differs from other employment initiatives offered across and by government to advance employment outcomes for CALD communities.

Ms YOUNG: Yes. I mean, part of the difference with the community employment connectors is that we are employing people from community as well. A lot of the connectors were themselves jobseekers or from the community, who have that connection with community, so I think it is really serviced by the community for the community. In terms of that direct connection with free TAFE, I would probably have to get a little bit of information for you on notice on that one.

Ms PITCHER: Actually, Nicola, I can probably speak to that one—

Ms YOUNG: Oh, yes, of course. Thank you.

Ms PITCHER: because once upon a time I spent a lot of time with free TAFE. The challenge that we had but the opportunity we had with free TAFE was that throughout COVID the TAFEs as learning institutions were needing to operate remotely, and there are a number of TAFE courses that really had the challenge of operating remotely because so much is practical and hands-on learning. So I would say, even compared to universities and schools, some of the TAFE courses and VET more broadly just have the challenge of being online, but they were able to do so and really changed a whole lot of delivery modes very early on in the pandemic. And so by the time the community employment connector roles were brought up we had a really good understanding of the best courses that we could connect people to that were well suited to being online and did not have the practical elements that were not able to be carried out during COVID.

As well, our department has such an expanse of different areas that need and have a really high demand for new workers. We are really interested in hiring new child protection workers, for instance, and we have had a really big push on people working in family violence, so we were able to use our community connectors not only to connect people with TAFE but to be able to talk to them about employment opportunities that we would expect to be available in our sectors coming through and very much because of the funding and programs that are in these areas be able to point people to places where we know that not only will there be jobs but their understanding of community, their language diversity—often speaking multiple languages—would make them really valuable employees for not only my department but the sector, the community sector. So that, I think, was one of the great ways that we were able to really channel all of the different programs that are available and make that free TAFE promise really work for those people and deliver them a real vision of a job at the end.

Ms TAYLOR: Thank you. So noting the importance of measuring the impact of investment—you know, that it is very critical in program design and implementation—how will the government measure the success and the impact of the program and the investment?

Ms PITCHER: Sorry, I missed the start of your question. Sorry about that.

Ms TAYLOR: So noting how critical it is to measure the impact of investment in program design and implementation, how will the government measure the success and the impact of the program and investment?

Ms PITCHER: Well, particularly for community employment connectors and other programs, we have the benefit within our department, shared with the Department of Health, of an internal evaluation unit that is able to build in evaluation to our work as we go, the Centre for Evaluation and Research—and there is another part of the acronym. So this is one of those examples of where we are able to do that dynamic evaluation, learn as we go and really point to what has worked. Obviously a big part of these connectors was happening during the sort of recovery from COVID, and now we are looking to, when we have got changing arrangements with lockdowns, what the opportunities will be to take the best parts of the program but make them fit the new needs that people have coming out of this last lockdown period.

Ms TAYLOR: Thank you. The economic downturn brought about by the pandemic may encourage exploitative practices by employers in many industries, where tight margins and loss of business will leave many looking for ways to further reduce costs, and migrant workers and those of CALD background in volatile industries or temporary working arrangements may find themselves likely to accept exploitative working conditions due to the lack of alternatives. Can you provide insight into how prevalent this issue is among multicultural communities and describe what measures or programs were implemented to help mitigate or allay these very real concerns?

Ms PITCHER: I might ask my colleague to take that question. Thanks.

Ms YOUNG: Thank you very much for that question. Certainly during COVID one of the programs that was implemented was the extreme hardship support program. That provided hardship payments for those who were not eligible for commonwealth support, and that was recognising that there were people who were not able to work and continue to work and provided that payment. Of course, more generally we have the Migrant Workers Centre, which is Australia's first government-funded organisation which was set up to prevent exploitation, mistreatment and workplace issues that are faced by migrant workers and international students as well as supporting refugees, people seeking asylum and workers residing on temporary visas. And the centre's role is really to provide information, training and support to migrant workers in Victoria and to really safeguard their rights and safety in the workplace. So between May 2019 and June 2021 the centre assisted migrant workers to recover over \$825 000 in stolen wages and worker entitlements, which is not something that an exploited or at-risk worker would normally be able to do, so really helping them to navigate those systems. They also maintained a website and digital channel and engaged over 25 000 visitors. They made referrals for 532 migrant workers to appropriate services and delivered 46 culturally appropriate training sessions on workplace rights and safety to migrant worker communities. There is also the multicultural ambassadors program, so they recruited 21 safety ambassadors and delivered 21 education sessions through this program. So really the centre has been an important partner in supporting temporary migrant workers through the pandemic and has also supported the delivery of public health information as well as supporting migrant workers to access available financial supports.

Ms TAYLOR: Thank you. I would just like to move on to gender equality investment. In the questionnaire you have reported that \$100 000 has gone towards funding delivery of the gender equality strategy, *Safe and Strong*. Could you please explain how rollout of *Safe and Strong* has improved gender equality in Victorian workplaces and in the community more broadly?

Ms PITCHER: Thank you for your question, and forgive me for going over some parts I mentioned earlier, just because it does link over. *Safe and Strong* really did have a focus on gender equality training both in the advertising industry, which I was speaking about earlier, but also looking at those areas where women have not traditionally achieved high numbers or indeed senior levels of success in the workplace, so the women in construction strategy, the *Women in Transport Strategy* and the building equity policy were all examples of where that has happened. But one of the areas that we have really focused on and *Safe and Strong* really led to

was the *Gender Equality Act 2020*, which was enacted on 25 February 2020. This legislation, which is really new and I think again certainly the first in Australia that I am aware of and quite world leading, requires all Victorian public sector organisations with 50 or more employees to measure and advance gender equality in the workplace against key indicators. In doing so, it is not just the public sector organisations like my department, but it is also universities, TAFE, as we were talking about before, and local councils. That has been one of the ways that *Safe and Strong* has really pushed different legislation and different new areas. So the Victorian government has funded \$13.4 million over four years and then \$3.2 million ongoing to support the implementation of the Act.

Ms TAYLOR: Thank you. So, noting that the COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately affected women, I believe the department has delivered a range of initiatives targeting priority communities in response to impacts of the pandemic, and funding has been provided to women's health services to deliver programs to address the acute mental health impacts of COVID on women. What has that money been spent on specifically, and can you report on any outcomes?

Ms PITCHER: Some of the money came from our department and some from the Department of Health, so I can probably speak more to the parts that came from our department. We are really focused throughout COVID on that connection—so connection to community, connection to other people, but also connection to people's wellbeing and mental health and other services. So the social connectedness was a really important part of that funding. Happy to provide more—

Ms TAYLOR: Good. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mr Newbury.

Mr NEWBURY: Thank you. Before I get to my substantive questions, can I just ask a couple of follow-ups from some of the previous issues. The child protection investigations—the annual report refers to 33 320 in June 2021. Do you have metrics on the number active versus complete?

Ms PITCHER: In terms of investigations, we probably would not use the language of 'complete'. That is why I am sort of struggling on that.

Mr NEWBURY: Okay. Active versus whatever word.

Ms PITCHER: In terms of there are ones that we have case closure parts, but I guess there are also tiers about that, as was sort of discussed earlier—the tiering of how serious and which level of investigation it goes to.

Mr NEWBURY: I understand. I am just after, Ms Toomey, if there is some kind of metric that talks about active versus however you want to phrase it—just active versus the other thing.

Mr ALISANDRATOS: Sorry, Mr Newbury, it is really a definitional issue. So investigations are either substantiated or not substantiated.

Mr NEWBURY: Okay.

Mr ALISANDRATOS: It is a phase, if you like, of one where you come through the front door, report to child protection, a determination then is made about—

Mr NEWBURY: So perhaps the easier way to say it is things that are not substantiated versus things that are currently being checked to see if they are substantiated.

Mr ALISANDRATOS: There are two outcomes for that, so it is substantiated or not.

Mr NEWBURY: Yes, okay. Could I ask for that figure then?

Mr ALISANDRATOS: We can take that away and provide that figure.

Mr NEWBURY: Okay. Do you have the average time line for—I take it, in terms of metrics, you would have an average time taken to check substantiation?

Mr ALISANDRATOS: Well, I think the phase essentially is what the outcome of that investigation is. So once we undertake an investigation, and there is a period of time where we try and—

Mr NEWBURY: I am sure you report the average time.

Mr ALISANDRATOS: Possibly not in those terms. So it is not something that we report nationally or through any of the mechanisms.

Mr NEWBURY: What about internally? It is just you mentioned that there were metrics you do record. What are those metrics? Other than the number of investigations in the annual report, are there any other metrics? You just mentioned metrics. That is the reasoning for my asking.

Ms TOOMEY: No. Thank you for the follow-up question, Mr Newbury. I was certainly referencing the metrics as captured in the annual report. We keep operationally a really close eye on time lines taken in relation to moving, particularly, a case from a report through to investigation, through to another intervention—

Mr NEWBURY: Could you then perhaps take on notice—

Ms TOOMEY: We can certainly have a look at what we can provide you to answer that question, but there are a range of factors that contribute to how long an investigation might take, depending on availability of—

Mr NEWBURY: Sure, I understand that, and I am sure in terms of the response you could put both the time line and then the explanation if need be. I am sure there would be no issue with that.

Okay, moving on to the towers that Mr Limbrick was asking about, I understand justice was looking after some of the operational matters. I presume the department recorded the number of residents that were contacting the department in terms of concerns. You would have case-managed concerns?

Ms PITCHER: Yes.

Mr NEWBURY: Do you have metrics on that?

Ms PITCHER: We can provide you metrics. Are you thinking about a particular time or across the whole financial year?

Mr NEWBURY: I am more than happy to take it by month if that is the easiest, rather than specific dates. You know, maybe per month a number of case-managed—I mean, I am careful with the word ‘complaint’, because it may be other issues as well—concerns, whatever. And I am specifically referring to the towers that were closed. If you would prefer to provide it more generally because, I do not know, for some reason you are not able to extrapolate to that detail, I understand that too.

Ms PITCHER: That is fine. I suspect then you are thinking more about concerns due to COVID rather than a concern about a noisy neighbour or—

Mr NEWBURY: Oh, yes, yes. I guess my point would be I expect that during the closure period there would have been a spike in complaints—or a spike in concerns, a spike in issues raised, a spike in contact—from residents living there to the department. And I am just wondering what data is available. If you could take that on notice, that would be great.

Mr RIMMER: We can definitely take that on notice.

Mr NEWBURY: Terrific. Thank you. And the last follow up was in relation to the 600 which I believe—I am talking about the foster carers. I think it was 596, in terms of the number of foster carers that left the system in the year 2020. Do you have any data on how many came in in the first part—the second half of the financial year in 2020–21—in terms of figures?

Mr ALISANDRATOS: I do not have it in front of me for that period of time, but we can take it away.

Mr NEWBURY: Thank you. I would like to ask a question about the Pride Centre. Who is the best person to talk to?

Ms PITCHER: I am happy to talk about the Pride Centre.

Mr NEWBURY: The opening of the Pride Centre, that was terrific. It is terrific that it is open, and I know my local community—I am just next door—is one block away, but, you know, we often go into St Kilda and my Elwood community certainly go into St Kilda. How was the organisation for the opening managed? I am not going to ask you whether or not council cleaned up the area for the Premier's visit. We will leave that one aside. How was the organisation for that opening in terms of who would attend? How was that organised?

Ms PITCHER: The Pride Centre launch, I have to say, sticks well in my mind because it was one of the events that I, at the time, believed was going to be the beginning of a lot more events that we were going to have, and then I think it was two days later that we did not. So certainly—and my colleagues may be able to give more detail—one of the things that I was very aware of during the Pride Centre opening was the challenge that we had in terms of complying with the public health officer's directions in terms of how many people we could have in the space. So I remember at that period of time that there were differing arrangements about space and open air and closed air that we were grappling with. So I do understand that actually even the day that we could invite people was delayed at different times as we were waiting for different advice from the public health team. In terms of who was—

Mr NEWBURY: So, in short, a list was decided and invitations went out.

Ms PITCHER: Yes. They did. There is a small team who works under the commissioner in my department who definitely were part of that work. I am just not sure if there is any further detail we would have. I think that is really probably—

Ms YOUNG: I mean, the opening was organised by the Pride Centre board, and so they were the ones who organised the invitations and sent out the list.

Mr NEWBURY: Terrific. So, in short, it was under the auspices of the department?

Ms YOUNG: No, no, no.

Ms PITCHER: Under the board.

Ms YOUNG: The board, the board for the Pride Centre.

Mr NEWBURY: Okay. But the invitations, I understand, went through—I have seen one of the invitations; I am sure it went through the department.

Ms PITCHER: I am not sure that they went through, but I know that the department was certainly helping the board with the logistical arrangements.

Mr NEWBURY: The reason I ask is—and I certainly note what you are talking about in relation to COVID. I mean, I have seen photos of the opening, and there were not three people there. I mean, it was packed. Well, it was very, very full.

Ms PITCHER: Full, but spaced.

Mr NEWBURY: Okay. Full, but spaced. I mean, when the Victorian Public Sector Commissioner releases guidance notes, does the department executive—are they aware of the guidance notes that are released by the public sector commissioner, just in general terms?

Ms PITCHER: Indeed, yes.

Mr NEWBURY: I mean, I presume they are circulated to the executive. So what I am wondering—

The CHAIR: Sorry, Mr Newbury, I just wonder if you can relate your questions to the relevant period.

Mr NEWBURY: Of course. Absolutely. I am relating it entirely to the relevant period.

The CHAIR: The Pride Centre opening, as I understand it, was in July, I think—

Mr NEWBURY: Yes, a couple of days into July, which means the invitations went out in June. Thank you. Secretary—

The CHAIR: So your questions are limited to the invitations.

Mr NEWBURY: Absolutely.

The CHAIR: Okay.

Mr NEWBURY: I do not think I have said anything else.

The CHAIR: You talked about how spaced or unspaced the actual event was and, as I have said, the event was in July

Mr NEWBURY: I am allowed to make mention of it, though. That is all right, isn't it? I can make side comments.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, I just ask that you make your questions relevant to the terms of reference, please.

Mr NEWBURY: This is getting tiresome. Secretary, you have confirmed that guidance notes are circulated amongst the executives, so you would be aware that there is a guidance note in relation to organisation of public events that mark significant milestones in the delivery of government-funded programs and projects. The guidance note is important, the commissioner says, because it is important that the department acts in an objective, independent, apolitical and impartial way—I am sure we all agree on that—and that if employees in the department have any issues, they would of course draw the attention of their executive to any concerns in relation to party-political issues and that employees of course would facilitate events in an apolitical way. I am sure we would all agree with that. As you said, the department executive is aware of those guidance notes.

In relation to the invitations to the Pride Centre opening—certainly again I will reiterate the COVID restrictions—I know that obviously the Premier was there, and I do not think anyone would begrudge the Premier being there. The Minister for Equality was there, and I certainly do not think anyone would begrudge the minister, who is also the local member. Two other Labor members were there—Mr Wynne and Ms Taylor, I believe were both there; one an upper house member and one the Member for Richmond, which is a little bit away from there. I know the shadow minister was not invited and neither were any of the non-Labor local members. Why would that be the case?

Ms PITCHER: I do not know why that would be the case, but the challenge here is that the Pride Centre board who ran the event—none of the board members are department employees; they are a separate board. I do not imagine that they consulted with us on who to invite, but I certainly know that they were the ones running and handling the invitations so—

Mr NEWBURY: Considering the department was obviously assisting with the event, and I presume they would have quite a bit of awareness of what was happening at the event they were organising, I guess what I am asking is—I mean, Mr Hibbins is next door, I am next door, the shadow minister was not invited. I think it is important when we are opening something that is about inclusion and equality that people be included in that event in that way.

Ms PITCHER: I certainly can understand that point, especially given—

Mr Maas interjected.

Mr NEWBURY: You live in St Kilda, don't you?

Mr MAAS: Yes. I am a single parent. Have you got something against that, Mr Equality and Inclusion?

Mr NEWBURY: Not at all, but you do not live in your seat—

The CHAIR: Order! Mr Newbury, if you could please keep your questions to the terms of reference of this inquiry—

Mr NEWBURY: He interjected. I do not see you making any reference there.

The CHAIR: I just called the room to order and I called everyone in the room to order. I would appreciate if you could keep your questions to the terms of reference of this inquiry to assist with the report that this committee is required to present to the Parliament.

Mr NEWBURY: Thank you, Labor Chair.

Ms PITCHER: I certainly think that the 2022 year for the Pride Centre—I know they are aspiring to be able to have as many people through the doors given that since the opening so few people have been able to do so, so I would expect that the Pride Centre and all of the different community organisations that have found a home in there will be looking to get as many people through there as possible. I would hope that that would include yourself and other members of the public accounts committee because it is an amazing building. It is a really important part of Victoria's, I think, past and future, and it is a building that we want everyone to be able to share in.

Mr NEWBURY: I agree, and I hope you take my comments in the way they were intended into the future.

I have got a couple of questions on multicultural affairs. In the 2020–21 budget there was \$1.4 million allocated to the Migrant Workers Centre. In February of this year the Auditor looked into the issues in relation to the Migrant Workers Centre and found that Trades Hall had, and I am quoting:

... admitted to misusing some of the DPC grant moneys it received for political campaigning activities at state and federal elections.

It is apparent that both DPC's and—
the Migrant Workers Centre's—

... compliance monitoring failed to detect this.

Noting the allocation in the 2020–21 budget, I would like to understand how the funds were allocated.

Ms PITCHER: Sure. I think it is a good question, and certainly the VAGO report that you refer to is something that I and the department are very familiar with and I think provides us some lessons. So we are very keen as a department to ensure that we manage grant funding in a best practice and probity-focused way, and certainly the VAGO report confirms that there was misused grant funding of—I think I have the number—\$17 883. I understand that money was returned to the department by the Migrant Workers Centre in February 2021, so this acquitted the Auditor-General's first recommendation.

We are very much focused on the Auditor-General's second recommendation, which was that the department undertake a review of our grant practices. So we have undertaken that review, and we identified some gaps in policy guidance, some inefficiencies in our platform and our outdated grant management platform—and really a bit of a challenge around grant management practice amongst staff, so training new staff. So taking on the good lessons that we learnt through that review, we have had a range of recommendations which we have identified to improve the practice within the department, and this is including the development of a Department of Families, Fairness and Housing specified grant management framework. And you will appreciate Fairer Victoria has come and joined different parts of the department to come together, so what we also saw was that there were very different grant practices just across the various different portfolios. So being able to bring together I guess the expertise and the lessons that we have learned both from this VAGO report but also the lessons that we have had across portfolios, including grants in the family sector, means that we have got that opportunity to have a really good focus for 2022 that means that we implement all of those findings.

Mr NEWBURY: Is that review you have done able to be provided to the committee?

Ms PITCHER: I can look into that. I believe it was an internal report, but I think it will be available. So I will take that on notice, to provide that.

Mr NEWBURY: Thank you. I do note the second recommendation of VAGO was that:

... all grant recipients ... certify that they have used the funds for their intended purpose ...

In relation to the funding in the 2020–21 budget is that finding being adhered to?

Ms PITCHER: Yes, it is. And in fact—

Mr NEWBURY: Tracked?

Ms PITCHER: Tracked, and with our review we have actually gone further even than the framework required. So we had fully transitioned to the model before 30 June, and we are going to continue to get to the best practice.

Mr NEWBURY: Would you mind just taking on notice—that \$1.4 million—what the money was used for? Just take that on notice, if you do not mind?

Ms PITCHER: Which \$1.4 million?

Mr NEWBURY: The budget allocation we have been referring to.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Newbury. Your time has expired, and I will pass the call to Mr Richardson.

Mr RICHARDSON: Thank you, Chair; and thank you, Secretary and department officials, for joining us this afternoon. We are on the home stretch. This is our last section, and we will be concluding. I want to go back to the topic of gender equality investment and particularly the topic of women's leadership programs. It has been really pleasing to see over the past few years and in this recent financial period and the outcomes period that the Victorian government has amplified the voices of women in government decision-making bodies. I am interested, on behalf of the committee, in how the government's investment in women's leadership has increased the availability of women's leadership programs in the community.

Ms PITCHER: Thanks for your question. It is really great to be able to talk about the women's leadership programs, because it has been both a significant investment but also a real commitment of the government to women's leadership. So \$750 000 for leadership programs in 2020–21 is building on funding of more than \$3.34 million since 2017, so we are now getting cohorts of women who are coming through this and being able to build that leadership cohort in the community.

There are a number of women's leadership programs that are longstanding that this funding supports. We have the Victorian honour roll program, which now has over 700 inductees; the women's board leadership program, which supported 62 women during 2020–21 to complete the AICD company directors course; and through the participate, advocate, communicate and engage—so PACE—leadership program, the Multicultural Centre for Women's Health supported 80 women of migrant and refugee backgrounds to develop leadership skills, and that was really in recognition that some of the other leadership programs were not getting as many people from multicultural backgrounds as we were hoping to attract, so we really targeted some of those programs.

The Victorian government is also actively seeking to increase the availability of these programs for women through new and more diverse program opportunities. Not everyone wants to do the AICD course. It is quite a challenging course, I will say.

Mr RICHARDSON: It is a grind. I have got some notes if anyone is interested.

Ms PITCHER: Yes, that is right. It is one of the harder ones. So we are just looking at the diversity of what leadership means and how it can be accessed. One of the ones I am really excited about that is coming soon is a new Aboriginal women's leadership program that was co-designed during 2020–21 and is now in its pilot phase, with more than 20 Aboriginal women participating. So that one will see more results coming in this year soon.

I think probably all of the committee members are really aware that the government has had a Women on Boards program that is longstanding and since 2015 has been really focused on changing the dynamic of boards. It is really a testament to the success of that program over many years that we now have, in 2021, 55 per cent of board seats held by women. It was 39 per cent six years ago. It has changed.

Mr RICHARDSON: I want to take you to the topic of intersectionality. Women have multiple intersecting experiences and identities, which can compound existing disadvantage and discrimination in our communities. How does the work of the Commission for Gender Equality in the Public Sector and the implementation of the *Gender Equality Act* consider and respond to the needs of Victoria's diverse population?

Ms PITCHER: Well, it is a great question, because while I know lots of different organisations talk about intersectionality in their work and it is certainly something that I think is happening across the sectors we work with, the *Gender Equality Act* is actually the first time where intersectionality has been brought into Australian equality law. Again, just thinking about the things that this Victorian law is doing that are not seen anywhere else, that recognition of intersectionality is here and will be one of the places where I think many other states and internationally look to Victoria. In the legislation the public sector organisations that I spoke about earlier have to undertake a workplace gender audit and it is based on data, not just on gender, but on Aboriginality, age, disability, ethnicity, gender identity, race, religion and sexual orientation. So that whole sense of people asking bigger and broader questions about their workforce, and not just the people who work for them but the people whose community they serve, is really given an opportunity through this legislation. We will have a new evidence base being built through these very first round of gender audits, and the gender impact assessments will be sort of a continuing growth of evidence.

Mr RICHARDSON: If I can take you to the topic of women's workforce participation, you talked a little bit about the great work that is being done on boards. But on the facing of barriers to leadership in male-dominated industries where there are strong cultural and institutional barriers to progression, how have the government's and the department's investment in women's leadership programs addressed the under-representation in women's leadership in traditionally male-dominated industries?

Ms PITCHER: Well, I would say that it is an ongoing work in progress, and in some ways COVID has been an interesting challenge for us and other states, where the gender pay gap has actually increased rather than decreased for the first time in many years. And for those of us who have watched the gender pay gap incrementally and too slowly decrease over time, the fact that we have seen it go the other way in this past year is a real cause of concern. Now, that has not just been in those sectors that you identified, but that has been across the economy, and we certainly have been concerned looking at the impacts of COVID on the areas where women are traditionally working—they were the hardest and first hit, particularly retail and the services sector.

I hold some optimism coming out of COVID, because we are looking at growing in those sectors across Victoria. We have got a real focus on social and economic recovery for communities, and I think we will see some of those gains that have been lost hopefully repaired and moving forward. But it is going to take some concerted work, and it does really show that some of the gains that we have made can be whipped away when something like a pandemic comes along. The strategy for women in construction, women in transport and the building equality policy are all sort of at their earliest stages, so we are in the early years of those strategies. What we are really doing is working with big industries in those areas to actually understand the way that systemic barriers have been affecting women and how they can be part of changing the structures and the system for increasing workforce participation.

We have also got a lot of programs—and I am not sure if any colleagues want to jump in here—on the way that we use procurement as a lever as government. So we spend so much money for public good, in terms of delivering for Victorians, and the opportunity to use social procurement levers so that we see those dollars have multiple outcomes is something that we are really focused on. And again, with the intersectionality question, we like the opportunity for dollars, like on the big build, to make impacts in women's employment, in Aboriginal employment, employing people who actually live and work in social housing as part of the return for all of community. So that is the other way that I think we as a government can really work with partners across the private sector and community sector to make those levers make a real difference.

Mr RICHARDSON: Did Nicola want to add anything, or is that covered off?

Ms MONAGLE: It is actually Brigid. Sorry, wrong name tag.

Mr RICHARDSON: Brigid, sorry.

Ms MONAGLE: No, you are all good. It is very confusing!

Ms PITCHER: She snuck in.

Mr RICHARDSON: Sorry, Brigid.

Ms MONAGLE: Yes, I would just add to that. As part of the *Gender Equality Act* there is a provision in there for the Minister for Women to work with whoever is the minister who is responsible for finance at that time to look at the social procurement framework and see if it can be taken further, I guess, in terms of what we can do, as the Secretary was saying, in terms of how we use the financial power of those big or small contracts to improve equality for women and other cohorts as well. So that work is ongoing at the moment.

Mr RICHARDSON: Fantastic. I might go to the topic of carers in the minutes that we have remaining and refer to budget paper 3, page 70: the pathways to employment in growth sectors program to provide care, relief and other supports to assist unpaid carers to enter or re-enter the workforce, undertake studies and clinical placements with a particular focus on unpaid carers facing challenges accessing employment due to their carer responsibilities: we know this is a significant issue and challenge. Can we please have an update, for the committee's benefit, on how this program is supporting carers who wish to re-enter or enter the workforce?

Ms PITCHER: Absolutely. And I think it is a really important question both going forward but also recognising the amazing work that carers did throughout the COVID pandemic. And I just want to pay a bit of a tribute to so many carers who partnered with the department to help the most vulnerable Victorians. It was something where we really saw that throughout COVID. So in terms of supporting carers—and we have more than 736 000 in Victoria—we have the *Victorian Carer Strategy*, so it is a 2018 to 2022 strategy that looks at five key areas: the health and wellbeing of carers; engagement with education, employment and community; access to respite and support; financial stress; and acknowledgement, recognition and respect. And the government has actually invested nearly \$50 million over four years to support unpaid carers, really looking at those five areas, and the funding includes \$42 million for an additional 100 000 hours of respite for an additional 5000 carers per year and \$4 million for statewide partnerships and local grants. And I think the part that you touched on in your question that is really important for us is those pathways to employment, because for many carers there are different periods of time for their caring where they would like to be in paid employment as well as unpaid caring, and there are often barriers from being out of the workforce that we are concerned to be able to bridge the gap with. So education, employment and community is an area where we have had the carers employment initiative.

This was really developed in partnership with the people who work with us to advise. So the Victorian carers advisory group particularly are great partners for us in conjunction with Carers Victoria, Different Journeys, Little Dreamers Australia and Tandem—so these are all organisations we work with. The initiative supports unpaid carers to re-enter the workforce, undertake studies—and we mentioned free TAFE and other opportunities before—or undertake clinical placements. The focus we have here is different from a traditional employment program because we have a couple of components where we think either in microjobs—so looking at flexible jobs in a range of sectors and settings that suit unpaid carers, who often cannot work full-time because of their caring responsibilities, so the very nature of their workforce engagement has been shaped by their caring. Microjobs are a really different way of thinking about employment. The other direct supports are things like pre-employment mentoring just to build confidence in that return to work and different practical assistance, like carer's relief so that the work can be fitted in around it, or those connections, as I said earlier, to training and other opportunities.

Then we also have post-employment mentoring and support so that that continuation of connection to the labour force can happen, and if it is a re-entry to the workforce, building the confidence and the connection to continue. So I think the microjobs is a great initiative in terms of innovation. It is not something that people often think about. I think it has really changed the face of the standard working week, but it also I think is important for us when we think—and certainly for me with the department I am leading—in terms of the different ways that we need workforce and the way that many of our community services, disability and ageing do not need the traditional Monday-to-Friday worker but actually need caring to happen and work to happen in very different arrangements. So it is a great partnership for us as well as the Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions to research and understand what is working and not working with the microjobs and really use those really important programs—Jobs Victoria as well as free TAFE as well as the Jobs Victoria advocates—to really make sure that our carers get a chance to access those.

Mr RICHARDSON: Fantastic, and a shout-out to Little Dreamers and Tandem, who do incredible work with young carers in our community. Just on the topic of respite, you mentioned before, Secretary, that the Victorian government has provided additional respite to carers through the supporting carers initiative, a really

important policy space to keep carers supported and their mental health and wellbeing supported as well. Are you able to explain for the committee's benefit how this extra funding is meeting the needs of our carers?

Ms PITCHER: Absolutely. The \$42 million that I mentioned over four years—so it is about \$10.5 million per year—really actually funds respite hours. So at its core it was 100 000 hours to 5000 more carers, which means that it just gives people that opportunity to have some respite and do things outside of their caring responsibilities. We know from engagement with the committees that we have got and our groups of partners how important this is for wellbeing and mental health for the carers as well as the people they care for. Then \$4 million over four years was for supporting carers locally and a statewide partnership grant as well to support carer health and wellbeing, reduce isolation—because often carers speak to us about isolation and losing that connection, and that came up even more so during COVID—assist carers in the education sector and also increase carer financial literacy, which is another cross-sector place where we have been able to put some of our evidence base to good work.

We have also had \$20.7 million per annum in funding—and this is recurrent, so ongoing—for 45 carers organisations, and that helps us deliver the support for carers program, which covers some of those examples I have already given, the suite of carer supports. In 2020–21 we had 19 service providers in the carer support program receive \$9.5 million to deliver additional respite, and that really reflects those COVID needs that we have talked about so much today and the different way it impacted on organisations.

Mr RICHARDSON: You mentioned some of those organisations, the 45 organisations. I understand statewide partnership grants were part of the supporting carers initiative. Are you able to explain for the committee's benefit some examples of how programs funded through the statewide partnership grant programs have assisted carers to undertake their important role?

Ms PITCHER: Absolutely. Five organisations in particular received \$0.9 million through those statewide grants, and they were really focused on innovation and partnership, so it was really bringing people together in different ways through those projects. That was looking at benefit for carers across the state, so rather than looking at individual carers they were much more looking at the caring cohort.

The navigation of the service system was a big one, so enabling carers to be able to not only support themselves but the people they care for by understanding the services system in a better way; obtaining support and advice—often carers do come to us and to our partners to get advice on issues that are confronting them; there was also work on building resilience, and that really fits in the mental health and wellbeing area; and again, as I mentioned, the social connections that I think were probably raised more and more in the COVID period than they ever had been. They were already an issue that we were concerned about, but the scale of people talking about social connections during COVID really increased.

It is worth saying as well that the Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria got really engaged with us and they were funded to deliver information about carer rights, supports and opportunities in language so that we made sure that the carer information was reaching a much more diverse group of Victorians and that our CALD communities were very much part of the carer conversation. That was another great way to see that partnership work.

I also mentioned the financial counselling. Financial Counselling Victoria is an organisation—again, a great partner—that helps develop approaches and resources to help older carers build their financial resilience. We have the office for the ageing and the ageing portfolio in the department, so that was another great crossover.

Mr RICHARDSON: Fantastic. Thank you very much.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Richardson, and thank you, Secretary and team. That concludes the time we have set aside for consideration with you today. The committee will follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing, and responses will be required within five working days of the committee's request.

We thank all the secretaries and officers who have given evidence to the committee today and across the week as well as Hansard and the secretariat as well as the cleaning, catering and security staff that have supported us. That concludes this round of these hearings. Thank you to everyone involved. I declare this hearing adjourned.

Committee adjourned.