

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into 2020–21 Financial and Performance Outcomes

Melbourne—Monday, 8 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

Mr Peter Lochert, Secretary, and

Mr Matthew Smith, Deputy Secretary and Chief Information Officer, Department of Parliamentary Services;

Ms Bridget Noonan, Clerk, and

Mr Robert McDonald, Deputy Clerk, Legislative Assembly; and

Mr Andrew Young, Clerk, and

Ms Anne Sargent, Deputy Clerk, Legislative Council.

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

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

All mobile telephones should 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.

You 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 Clerks and the Secretary from the department of the Parliament. We invite you to make an opening statement of no more than 5 minutes, and this will be followed by questions from the committee.

Mr YOUNG: Thank you, Chair and members. We are conscious of the time limit, although I must admit I thought it was 10 minutes, so we are going to be even more conscious of the time limit, and we will try and get through this in as timely a fashion as possible. I will speak to some slides, followed by Mr Lochert, then Ms Noonan, and Mr Lochert will then finish.

Visual presentation.

Mr YOUNG: In this first table you will see the figures appropriated for the four output groups for the Parliament administration in the left-hand column, noting that the DPS amount includes member budgets. Just in terms of a quick overview of some of the variances, where there are underspends there is the simple explanation of COVID in most cases affecting levels of business. The Council still zeroed out because of the costs of the regional sitting. In the case of DPS there was \$4.9 million carried over to the current financial year. The remaining \$9.4 million underspend relates to a series of things, including \$4 million for some late approval of 2020–21 ERC funding for projects which had been funded internally, notably things like the meals program. There was \$1.9 million for a software development project which actually ended up being capitalised, hence that figure changing. And there were in fact 12 standard EO relocations charged to capital instead of output. There were some other factors as well, but they are just a few of the factors. There is a carry forward of \$7.3 million from 2019–20, which included particularly \$6 million relating to MP, EO and communications budgets. I might go to the next slide; thanks, Matt.

The previous slide talked about a figure of \$152 million from appropriations. In this chart you will see a total of \$159 million, which is that \$152 million plus a \$7.3 million carryover from the 2019–20 year. In terms of some of the notable budget allocations, as mentioned the DPS budget includes MP-administered budgets. And just as a reminder, that pays for 2.5 EO salaries in each EO. It includes electorate office utilities, telephone landlines and electorate office maintenance.

In terms of additional output funding for new initiatives in 2020–21, particularly in the DPS space, probably the main highlight there of the \$6.154 million was \$3.78 million for the charity meals program, which course has been well publicised over the past 18 months but which came to a conclusion, Peter, I think at the end of the financial year.

Mr LOCHERT: Correct.

Mr YOUNG: Thank you. Next slide thanks, Matt.

Parliamentary department asset appropriation: there are figures there, as you can see, for electorate office accommodation and for some chamber technology upgrades—that is in both chambers, the Assembly and the Council. Some of that was delayed due to COVID-related issues and resources coming from Europe being delayed, so some of that will be completed in the current financial year. There are of course the ongoing Parliament House historic restoration works, which you see outside the building, which have been going for many years—we are up to the final stage, stage 13—so there is some money for that. Then electorate office laptops, particularly timely given the flexibility needed for remote working arrangements. I will leave my comments there and hand over to Peter.

Mr LOCHERT: Thanks, Andrew. I guess the main thing that characterised the reporting period was very much COVID-19—the pandemic, the impact it had on the organisation as a whole and highlighting the response that the parliamentary departments mounted to deal with that.

Initially in the last few months of the last financial year it was really a move out from the precinct and the electorate offices to work from home, so there was quite a drastic and very fast kind of response. It was a bit helter-skelter. During the current financial year—the financial year that you are looking at—the response was much more measured and structured, and we were able to mount a response to a lot of the pressures; for example, facilitating the procedural arrangements to enable both houses to keep sitting. And I do not think I need to highlight to you how many changes you had to endure there, and we attempted to support those as well as we could. Parliamentary committees, a massive change for us in terms of how the committees operated—whereas we might have normally webcast one committee, now 98 per cent of all committee meetings are webcast using many technologies and many locations; supporting MPs and EOs; construction activity across Parliament House and in particular having to cope with the changes there that related to delays in the construction project.

Thanks, Matt. Next. A key strategic objective of the parliamentary departments is supporting members to fulfil their roles as elected representatives, and the impact of the pandemic on members has been huge in many respects. Normal initiatives that we are running with, like the implementation of VIRTIPS—the remuneration tribunal—new guidelines that were issued had significant changes, and there was a lot of training required. The employee assistance program saw a huge increase in demand, particularly from electorate officers and parliamentary officers. The electorate office relocations—although we had planned for 25 offices, we were not able to complete all of them simply because we could not go out there and inspect offices and do property inspections or have the offices refurbished.

As Mr Young already indicated, one of the major achievements for us during the period was the charity meals program. That was initiated when the pandemic initially broke between March and June 2020. We funded the initial period out of some of the surplus DPS funding that was not needed because of the reduction in activity because of the pandemic. Then we approached government, and we were supported to be able to fund it for a full year. The funding was allocated at \$3.78 million. We only spent \$3.64 million, and certainly I think the result of 1.5 million meal items distributed through charity partners was one of the highlights of the year, certainly for the staff and I think the organisation as well.

Ms NOONAN: Thanks, Peter, and thanks, Matt. Despite the pandemic we have been able to engage with the community in a range of ways. I will not cover each of those now, but we are certainly happy to take any questions you have about those activities and events. Thanks, Matt.

I guess this slide notes a range of business improvement activities and compliance activities that many of my colleagues have worked very hard on. Some of them members will be familiar with because they have seen them, walked around them or been part of them, whereas others are very much behind the scenes,

back-of-house functions that we hope will improve service delivery to you and to the community. Again they are things that we would be happy to take questions on. Thanks, Matt.

The pie chart on the top left there you will have seen when we presented at estimates hearings, and the one next to it on the right is a comparison from the subsequent 90 days. The number of phishing emails over that 90-day period has been reduced by about 30 000. However, the number of emails blocked at the edge of the network by Microsoft actually doubled in that time. Spam email that has been prevented increased by around 5000 emails over that period. The number of failed login attempts in the past 30 days, which is that little chart down the bottom, had a significant spike on 28 September, which was another worldwide attack across many accounts. 234 emails, which was down from 438 in the previous period, were removed post delivery due to updated detection and intelligence works. 3608 links, down by about 450, were blocked by being clicked on by an on-demand URL check-in tool that we run. And over the last 30 days an additional 12 010 emails were blocked by some advanced email filtering technologies that we use. A further 20 359 links were blocked due to suspicious indicators.

Mr LOCHERT: Thanks, Bridget. The last two things that we would like to highlight are very significant impacts that came to be as a result of the pandemic or during the pandemic, and I will highlight here that the figures that you will see are slightly different from the figures that are in the DPS annual report simply because we have been investigating events and updating the data. These are the correct figures as of today.

Essentially we have seen a 92 per cent increase in security incidents in electorate offices, so from about 107 in 2019–20 to 205 in 2020–21. Out of those, 13 individuals were charged by police. The commentary I would make there is that the level of threat that members and electorate officers in particular across the whole political spectrum have been subjected to has been extraordinary, and what the numbers do not tell you is just the intensity of the kinds of attacks that we are seeing and the sorts of threats that we are seeing. That has of course had a consequent impact on mental health, wellbeing and the threat feeling amongst particularly staff in the electorate offices, and that has seen a huge increase in the activity that the security advisers have been engaged in, going out to electorate offices and working in that space.

The process that we follow is very much that we work with Victoria Police and the intelligence agencies and with mental health in the health department as well. It is something of concern. It is something that we are continuing to keep an eye on, and it is something that is constantly challenging us. We have a program to improve the security overlays of all electorate offices. There are 28 additional ones. I have not got the total that we have done, but we must be getting close to 80 per cent of all of the electorate offices that now have a new security overlay and training for the staff to be able to deal with it.

The second area I would highlight that has had a fairly significant impact on us is the works on Parliament House. We acknowledge that Parliament House seems to have been a building site for the best part of 10 years. We are reaching the end—

Members interjecting.

Mr LOCHERT: I beg your pardon? Yes. I wasn't here then.

Mr NEWBURY: Close.

Mr LOCHERT: Close, yes. But in particular because we are reaching, I guess, the last two stages of the restoration of the stonework around the building that started in 2006, and then the internal works—refurbishing the east wing. They have both been significantly delayed because of the slowdown of the building industry during COVID. Hence, you are going to see in the budgets that there has been significant underexpenditure in the capital works budgets and they have been carried forward to continue further down the track.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. Deputy Chair.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon, everyone. Secretary, you mentioned in there, for a start, the security threats against MP's offices and particularly electorate staff but also the workload increase through COVID. The decision on the number of staff provided to MPs: is that a bid by Parliament to Treasury through the budget process, or is it—a couple of years ago we got an extra half a staff member—

Mr LOCHERT: You mean the 2.5 EFT?

Mr D O'BRIEN: Yes, and that came out of nowhere. So I just wanted to know: is it Parliament's decision to offer more staff, or is it a government decision?

Mr LOCHERT: No. It has been a government decision to fund it through the budget process, yes.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Okay. But just to clarify, you and/or the Presiding Officers remain the employer of electorate office staff?

Mr LOCHERT: The Presiding Officers acting jointly are the employers of electorate office staff. With parliamentary advisers, the main parties in the larger numbers are the employers, and in the case of the crossbenchers, mostly it is delegated to the Secretary.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Right. Okay. But for electorate office staff it is the Presiding Officers?

Mr LOCHERT: Correct.

Mr D O'BRIEN: There have been a number of issues over the years, including at the moment with IBAC investigating misuse of parliamentary entitlements. What role does Parliamentary Services have in managing discipline or termination of someone if they have done the wrong thing in working in an electorate office?

Mr LOCHERT: What has been delegated to the Secretary and to the department is the administration of the employment relationship, not the decision-making.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Right.

Mr LOCHERT: So in other words we would process the appointment on nomination from a member. We would do the inductions. We would provide the payroll. We would write to the MP to do things like confirmation of employment at the end of probation, and then we would do whatever is required, either by approach from the MP or from the electorate officer, when it comes to industrial relations matters from that perspective.

Mr D O'BRIEN: What about matters of either criminality or other wrongdoing—breaches of public service standards? So, for example, we are hearing in the last couple of weeks of electorate officers actually engaged in paid political work, which is specifically prohibited.

Mr LOCHERT: Yes.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Does the Parliament have a role to step in on that?

Mr LOCHERT: As the Secretary and as the head of a special body, I have a particular obligation to report any activity like that, if I have reason to suspect it or detect it, to IBAC, but apart from that we do not really have much visibility into what actually happens in electorate offices, nor do we have, I guess, the mechanisms for either monitoring or investigating what electorate officers are doing.

Mr D O'BRIEN: But in the circumstance where it comes out in a public hearing that they were doing the wrong thing are you relying on the MP to then either terminate an employment or is it a role for the Speaker and the President to actually come in and say, 'Well, actually this person is not—

Mr LOCHERT: No. Termination decisions would always be made by the employer, which is the Speaker and the President acting jointly. We would not be able to do that. We might be able to process it where it is a mutually agreed departure but not when it is a dismissal.

Mr D O'BRIEN: With respect to IBAC at the moment, is the Parliament paying for legal fees for any electorate officers?

Mr LOCHERT: No.

Mr D O'BRIEN: That has not been done at all?

Mr LOCHERT: It is not one of the things that we do.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Okay. So that becomes a private matter, even if they are—

Mr LOCHERT: Correct.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Right. It does not come through WorkCover in any way, shape or form?

Mr LOCHERT: No, not that I am aware of, but certainly not through the DPS processes.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Okay. So what is—

The CHAIR: Mr O'Brien, I have been lenient in relation to your questions, but I would remind you that this inquiry is the financial and performance outcomes for the 2020–21 year, if you could make your questions relevant, please.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Operation Watts at IBAC has been going for some time, so I was going to ask specifically if the answer was 'Yes' for this particular year. So just to clarify: if there is evidence of wrongdoing by an electorate officer, publicly available, is it up to the MP or the Presiding Officers to take action against them?

Mr LOCHERT: I mean, that is a hypothetical. It depends on how it comes out. If I were to detect it, we would report it to IBAC. Under the current circumstances—

Mr D O'BRIEN: I am talking where it is actually already out.

Mr LOCHERT: Under the current circumstances it is something that is currently under investigation, so I would expect that action might be taken at the end of the process as a result of recommendations.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Okay. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr O'Brien. Mr Maas.

Mr MAAS: Thanks, Chair. And thank you all for your appearance today. My question will go to, firstly, the charity meals program and then to speak more broadly on community engagement. So firstly, in terms of the charity meals, you mentioned there was \$3.78 million or thereabouts that was put towards that in 2020–21. Aside from the obvious, in the number of meals that were actually produced, what were some of the other outcomes that came out from that investment?

Mr LOCHERT: Look, the interesting thing was that it was very much a staff-initiated suggestion. There were discussions that were being had with the Presiding Officers around the concern that we had about the impact of COVID on our casual staff in the Parliament, as you know, because of the ups and downs of sitting and non-sitting weeks. We had a number of casual staff and in particular in the catering area, so there were some conversations and suggestions as to how we might be able to do something. Given that some of our staff are already very involved in that space and one of our strategic objectives was engagement with the community, that sort of morphed into a suggestion of conversations through partners like the Salvation Army, St Peter's Eastern Hill just behind us and a number of other groups. There were eight in total. So when we started the program, it had that impact of safeguarding the employment of our staff to provide them with a continuity and to try and provide some kind of a benefit, which was at the time a little bit unformed. As we went on, we realised that particularly the charity partners, the charity bodies, because of the pandemic were actually suffering quite a reduction in donations to them and their ability to meet the needs of disadvantaged people and at the same time an increase in the number of disadvantaged. We proved the concept, in a sense, by using some of the money. Because of the decrease in activity on the precinct we were able to fund some of that. Government then supported us, and we were able to do it for a full year. The transition away from that program was managed with a program of training of people in the various charity partners. We did things like barista courses and equipment transfers and training on preparation of meals to try to go from this peak of 7000 and 8000 meals a week to nothing. So we transitioned that. So hopefully we left a benefit there that was longer lasting than just the program.

Mr MAAS: Terrific. Thank you. Excellent social and economic investment there. Ms Noonan, maybe if you could talk us through some of the broader community engagement that has been taking place, given that the public cannot physically come here.

Ms NOONAN: Sure. Thanks very much for the question, and I will list a few activities and probably leave just as many out, so I welcome my colleagues jumping in. Some of the big events that you will be familiar with were of course the special sitting of the Assembly up at the Royal Exhibition Building in March to coincide with the tabling of the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health report, and of course a short time after that the Legislative Council decamped to Bright for its regional sitting, and there were lots of ancillary committee and education activities in the north-east community for that, which was great.

I think I spoke at estimates about our online incursion program for schools, which has really replaced during the pandemic the on-site school visits and also schools touring here, but we will keep it as part of our ongoing program. We have continued our work supporting our Pacific colleagues in Fiji, Nauru and Tuvalu throughout the pandemic as well. One thing I am quite proud of, and I will spruik to a room full of committee members, is the parliamentary committee staff have developed a submissions writing workshop to help committee stakeholders. In that case they looked at community sectors, so through VCOSS, but equally you could roll the concept out to a range of different committee stakeholders to help them write quite targeted and punchy submissions. So I think that was a really good activity. And the other thing I wanted to flag was a We Lead forum for young women leaders that was conducted earlier this year, with the assistance of some MPs.

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

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mr Hibbins.

Mr HIBBINS: Thanks, Chair. Thanks, everyone, for appearing this evening. I want to ask first about the legal advice that was sought from Mr Chris Horan, QC, in regard to remote or hybrid parliamentary sittings and in regard to remote voting—obviously very warranted during lockdowns. Can I ask: was that advice provided to government?

Mr YOUNG: I suppose indirectly, in that certainly in the Council it was made available to some members, and Bridget, I think that was probably the same in the Assembly. Is that right?

Ms NOONAN: I would have to go back and check, but I think I circulated it. Did we circulate it at the time?

Mr YOUNG: Yes. Certainly at the time there were some meetings being had with Presiding Officers and leaders of parties in both houses. Discussions around the legal position of remote sittings, voting and things like that and the meaning of the magic words like 'present' were being had. I agree with Bridget: I would want to go back and double-check just exactly how, but I am reasonably sure that it was made available to them in some form. But obviously there were, I guess, many points of view floating around at the time about how certain one could be of any single piece of legal advice.

Mr HIBBINS: Okay. All right. Thank you. Yes, just for clarity if it needs to be taken on notice. My understanding is it was tabled in the Council in September 2021 but the advice was sought in September 2020. So I am really wanting to know when the advice was first received whether that was then subsequently provided to government.

Mr YOUNG: Yes. I would want to double-check just exactly when and how. Bridget and I sought it for our own, I suppose, edification to some extent, in our ability to think through any issues that members might raise around sessional orders, temporary orders—things like that.

Ms NOONAN: We do a lot of work preparing for things that never come to pass and then put them in the magical Clerk's bottom drawer. I think Andrew is right: we were anticipating that were we asked to draft sessional orders or temporary orders, we wanted to be clear in our own minds about the scope of what was possible.

Mr HIBBINS: Okay. I am presuming that there was no—apart from the advice, there was no preparatory work done based on that advice to—

Ms NOONAN: It would be in the Clerk's bottom drawer, Mr Hibbins.

Mr HIBBINS: Okay.

Ms NOONAN: I do not mean to be facetious. I think I did draft something—not at anyone’s request. I was trying to think ahead of what it would look like.

Mr HIBBINS: Were there any sort of technological things created—for example, to prepare for potentially voting or anything along those lines?

Ms NOONAN: Not really, not in the Assembly. I cannot speak for—

Mr YOUNG: Not specifically technically, no.

Mr HIBBINS: All right. Thank you. I might now move to Hansard resources for committee hearings. Now, the specific example I have got is that the Environment and Planning Committee held regional hearings for their ecosystems inquiry, and they were informed that Hansard would not be able to broadcast or hold Zoom hearings for any of the regional visits, which obviously meant for many regional visits that they were either in person or not at all for witnesses and members. Are there any steps being taken to ensure that remote participation is available for future committee hearings that are held outside of metropolitan Melbourne?

Mr LOCHERT: I will hand over to Matthew Smith—Hansard reports to him—but I will start the answer, Mr Hibbins, by saying that we are constantly reviewing the Hansard and webcasting area. That is probably where we have seen the biggest impact in terms of resources. As I indicated when we were making the presentation, we have gone from routinely webcasting one committee to 98 per cent of committee hearings. But the big issue is that now each committee hearing is a much more complex exercise for us than it has been in the past. You might have members of committees participating from four or five different places, including some members who ask their questions and make their contributions from cars on the side of the road using their mobile phones, and all of the witnesses come in using a plethora of means.

Mr SMITH: The answer is yes, we are looking at options at the moment.

Mr HIBBINS: Great. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mr Newbury.

Mr NEWBURY: Thank you, all. Secretary, two issues I just wanted to touch on with you. The security incidents you raised in your slides: I note that they were new figures than have been previously reported—205 incidents, which is up 92 per cent on previous years incidents at electorate offices, and public reports show an increase of 124 per cent at ministerial offices. Do those figures include incidents in the community or at members’ or their staff’s homes?

Mr LOCHERT: They include all of the incidents that have been reported to us. So they can be happening in the precinct—

Mr NEWBURY: Anywhere?

Mr LOCHERT: Anywhere. And in fact the change between the annual report and now—in the annual report we reported 197 and here we have got 205—is just an update going back with people reporting late.

Mr NEWBURY: I am not suggesting there is anything nefarious about it.

Mr LOCHERT: No, I am just saying that usually you see the numbers reported, and as we investigate them they either grow or go down, but they are everything that is reported. Now, our estimate is that not all incidents are reported.

Mr NEWBURY: I am sure that is absolutely the case. One of the reasons that people raise—there are probably two big reasons, and one of them is that there is clearly a mental impact on staff members and their families, and I think it is a significant issue. It is a significant issue when you consider the proportional increase, I think. So staff, their families, members and their families feel it in a disproportionate way just because of the extraordinary growth over the last year and also because of what we have seen more recently in the UK and that tragic, tragic circumstance—well, two circumstances—of safety resulting in two members passing.

I did want to ask—and I note you talked about a mental health package for staff and members and also upgrades to safety to electorate offices—have you considered whether there are other things that may be needed in terms of bringing about added protections potentially other than just an upgrade to an office and a mental health impact?

Mr LOCHERT: Yes, very much so. We have recently had a review of security conducted by our internal auditors, Ernst & Young, and we are in the process of upgrading, I guess, our security posture and capability again, moving very much away from the precinct. From 2014 the focus has very much been on precinct and terrorism. The risk is now very much in that space that you described. It is in—

Mr NEWBURY: Have you looked at the law? I know there is a difference—I am not advocating for either of them, but there are protections for commonwealth public servants and there are not protections for state public servants. Have you noted that there is a statutory difference in protection?

Mr LOCHERT: I am not personally familiar with it. We have been looking at various forms of protection from a resourcing point of view, from an education point of view and also to try to get some legislative backing for actions. We work very—

Mr NEWBURY: Well, if I can note that particular different view in that capacity. The other issue I just wanted to touch on was CCTV in members' offices. I am aware of a member—a number of constituents came to his office and police requested footage from that office and fined over 20 people for breaches of COVID restrictions \$1817 each person. The member was not aware that the footage was passed over. What footage from our offices is passed over?

Mr LOCHERT: There is a policy and a protocol by which police or investigative agencies can request some footage if it relates to the investigation of a breach or some kind of police investigation outside of the office—nothing that is inside. It follows a process where the officer requesting needs to certify that the request is in line with an active police investigation—

Mr NEWBURY: Does the member know?

Mr LOCHERT: Sorry?

Mr NEWBURY: Does the member get notified?

Mr LOCHERT: It depends on what the issue is. If it is just an outside event, for example, a fire, an accident or in some cases—

Mr NEWBURY: An emergency event, for example.

Mr LOCHERT: Whatever—anything like that.

The CHAIR: Sorry, Mr Newbury, your time has expired.

Mr NEWBURY: Thank you.

The CHAIR: I will pass the call to Ms Richards.

Ms RICHARDS: Thank you. I am interested in exploring some of the new technologies we have got in the chambers. Thank you, Secretary, and all of you for being here this afternoon. Many of us have noticed the upgrades. I know on page 15 of the questionnaire there is a listing of chamber technology upgrades, and I am wondering if you could provide the committee with a little bit of detail about those upgrades and the outcomes. We sometimes experience them, but we are not particularly aware of what is actually going on.

Mr LOCHERT: Can I maybe pass to Matt Smith, our CIO and resident technologist.

Mr SMITH: The technology that we had in the chambers has been in place for a number of years and was starting to reach the end of its life where we were seeing some reliability issues with microphones not switching on at the appropriate times. Over the last 12 months we have started to recable the chambers to bring them up to modern cabling standards but also into a design that was more resilient to faults so that if there was an issue

Parliament would not have to be interrupted as a result of not being able to record proceedings. That chamber technology will set us up for about the next seven to eight years, at which point we will look at it again. So it will give us much more resilience and it will give us a better quality of audio.

Ms RICHARDS: I am interested perhaps in understanding how these upgrades have interacted with COVID-19 restrictions, because we are conscious of those different changes as well and how that outcome has been different for members. I know my own experience, but I am interested in understanding that.

Mr SMITH: It has given us the ability to I guess be a bit more flexible in the layout of the chambers so that we can have greater social distancing within the chambers, but it will give more options into the future to do different things with the audio if we want to have different layouts and people sitting in different places. So all in all it is a more resilient and it is a more flexible design that can ensure that if Parliament wants to change anything about the way it sits, that is able to occur.

Ms RICHARDS: Terrific. Thank you. Back to you, perhaps, Secretary, on page 27 of the questionnaire there is a note of an increased expenditure on consultants for the 2020–21 budget compared to 2019–20. I am interested perhaps if you could describe the outcomes of this spending and how this expertise has benefited Parliamentary Services.

Mr LOCHERT: I might need to pass over to one of the Clerks. Most of the consultancies that were reported during that period have actually been in parliamentary committees. Within Parliamentary Services we have tended to employ a lot of contractors to very specifically deliver functions, but we have not really employed that many consultants during the period.

Ms NOONAN: The one that is springing to the top of my mind—and I am waiting to be interrupted by a colleague—is particularly the Scrutiny of Acts and Regulations Committee engages specialist legal and human rights advice, so that is probably a big one. And then some other committee inquiries have used—excuse me while I caucus with a colleague.

I can come back to you with a list of specific ones, but the Electoral Matters Committee of course with their social media impact on elections inquiry perhaps got some specialist advice there.

Ms RICHARDS: Yes. Okay, terrific. Great, fantastic. So I have less than a minute now to circle back to contractors. I have seen that that is an important part of delivering parliamentary services and that there are many specialist contractors. Can you describe the outcomes of any of the unique skills that you have been able to contract in and how that has impacted?

Mr LOCHERT: I guess a mode of operation for DPS is that we do not have a lot of staff and we rely very much on bringing in contractors as and when we require them. Many of the temporary and contract staff would be specifically employed to complete a task that we do not have skills in in-house, and one of the typical examples would be the design of works or the design of work health and safety, although now we have established an internal work health and safety unit and we can do most of that internally. Most of the contracting that I am aware of in the last period was associated with our internal audit, which we contract out, and then some of those specialised services.

Ms RICHARDS: Thank you so much. Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mr Limbrick.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you, Chair. And thank you, everyone, for appearing today. My first question is probably for Mr Smith around broadcasting and live streaming. It is my understanding that there has been a plan for some time to allow on-demand live streaming, similar to what the federal Parliament has. Could you maybe give us an update on where that is at? It is a common request that I get from people. They say, ‘Oh, I really wanted to watch this but I couldn’t, because I was at work’ or whatever.

Mr SMITH: We have got an internal broadcast on demand system that is made available to internal staff. We are looking at a number of different options to make that available externally, and part of doing that is ensuring that if there is a large demand for those video downloads, that does not have any impact on our network and how we can have that hosted in a manner that is going to ensure availability without impact

internally. In the meantime there has been a significant interest in question time, so we have actually started to publish question time on our YouTube channel for people to watch that evening—

Mr LIMBRICK: Oh, really?

Mr SMITH: and that is generally available by about dinnertime on a sitting day. The making available of the entirety of proceedings is something that we are currently looking at and whether or not we can take our existing system and make it available externally. One of the things that we need to consider in doing that is how we can then tie together the written form of *Hansard*, meet our accessibility obligations and ensure that people can find the footage or the topics that they are interested in. Our internal system does allow that, so making that available externally will require additional resources and work.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you. Yes, it is just a request I have had from a lot of people. They say, ‘I wanted to watch this, but I was at work’.

Mr SMITH: Members are able to access that themselves or their staff, but they also have the option, if they want it very quickly—for example, with something timely or topical—they can request access or that footage to be done for them via a concierge service as well.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you. My next question is probably for Mr Lochert around security again. With this large increase we have seen in security incidents, do we have insight into the underlying causes? You mentioned, I think, you have been liaising with mental health services, and I think most MPs would have had the experience of people with acute issues calling their office, and that has probably increased dramatically during the lockdown period. Do you have insights into what is causing this?

Mr LOCHERT: We do not have definitive figures on all of the incidents. We refer most of them to FTAC, the fixated threat assessment centre, and SIU, the security intelligence unit of Victoria Police. But the trends that we are seeing are very much around, yes, the pressure of lockdown, the issues that everybody has had to face and then very often a fixation on a local member of Parliament as the potential source or resolution of their problems. That is not always possible, as you would know better than I do. And then there is a level of frustration, and a reaction against that sometimes has led to quite explosive kinds of actions. That is one element. The second one has been just politically motivated attacks, and very often they are more geared towards damage to property rather than threats to individuals. But where it has become really difficult is when either MPs or individual electorate officers may have been identified through a phone call or an email or something like that by somebody who is particularly incensed and then start seeing the personal attacks and personal threats against staff. Those we would class as being very serious incidents, and they are always referred to police and they are acted upon.

There is always a baseline, I guess, of security activity, and as I said in the presentation, I think the changes now are just the number of incidents and what motivates them. But what stands out is the intensity of them. So the types of threats, the language being used and the sentiment that is carried by the threat are much higher and much more extreme than we have seen in the past.

Mr LIMBRICK: Okay. Thank you.

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

Ms TAYLOR: Yes. Thank you all for coming today. Just on this issue of security, I think it would be good to understand some of the actions that you have taken to improve it and what the outcomes of these actions have been—trying to look at the proactive side of the situation.

Mr LOCHERT: Yes, thank you. I mean, the first thing that we have done is we have restructured our security capability internally. We have employed a new chief security officer out of industry, a very highly qualified person, who has been engaged in order to uplift our whole capability. We were already sitting at a fairly high level, but it is bringing up the capability even higher. The investment that we are talking to government about would be based on the results of the review that we have conducted and that has been conducted for us by our internal auditors and solutions that have been provided.

As I said before, the parliamentary precinct—given the upgrades we have done since 2014 with terrorism in mind—is already a relatively secure environment. But the risk is out in electorate offices—so accelerating the upgrade of security overlays in electorate offices. We have restructured the way that we offer security advice. We now have security advisers going out to electorate offices to proactively contact members. We have made risk and threat assessments of electorate offices, depending on their location, their age or the occupant, and we are dealing with those. We are very much partnering with local police forces along those lines. And you will see, starting in the next couple of sitting weeks, a greater emphasis on training and briefing members on security strategies and security issues.

We have recently had a study done by some academics from a couple of the universities—and many of you would have seen the questionnaires and may have contributed to those—highlighting the nature of threats, the nature of the risks that members have faced outside of the parliamentary precinct while they go about their day-to-day. That, coupled with some similar research in the UK, coupled with some similar research in the Queensland Parliament and in New Zealand, gives us a very good baseline to be able to then come to the members and to the electorate offices with training and with resources that might make, you know, the ability to deal with the threat better. You cannot make the threat go away, unfortunately. The current climate is really peaking, but to best equip the parliamentary community to deal with it—education and resources.

Ms TAYLOR: Very good. Just on the issue of community engagement, because I think it was listed in the questionnaire—obviously it is a very important part of Parliament to be able to reach the Victorian community so that they are aware of everything that is happening—can you take us through how you were able to overcome this challenge during COVID of engaging with community in spite of the obvious challenges?

Mr YOUNG: You can take that.

Ms NOONAN: Look at it: bicameralism in action, deciding who would answer the question. I think it is probably too crass to use the phrase ‘silver linings’, but I would look at the increased, as Matt and Peter have said, broadcast of committee hearings. I think it has been a really useful community engagement tool, as has our schools program with the online incursions. I know the community at large has had, probably, Zoom fatigue, but we are continuing to move a lot of our programs online. You know, we participated in Open House Melbourne in a digital capacity. Whether those sorts of things stay part of our ongoing community engagement program I am not sure. The online incursions will, because that is meeting a need, particularly for remote and regional schools. Not everything has worked as perfectly as we would have liked, but I suppose the pandemic has given us the opportunity to try a few things that we might not have otherwise had the time, energy or inclination to try, so I think that has been a positive. Is there anything I am missing from the Council perspective?

Mr YOUNG: I do not think so.

Ms NOONAN: Okay.

Ms TAYLOR: Thanks, Andrew.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mrs McArthur.

Mrs McARTHUR: Thank you, Chair. Just to be clear, Secretary, I had an incident where the police needed to contact me to get access to footage, which I happily gave approval for. So is it the protocol that the police need to contact the member if there are issues outside of the office that do not relate perhaps to the office? What about if the issues are relating to constituents that might want to enter the office? Do the police come to the member first or security?

Mr LOCHERT: I can speak to how we would respond to a request. We would not always know if the police had gone to the member first. But, I mean, if the police have gone to the member first and the member approaches us, we would still request that police certify that the request is in order to fulfil the needs of an active investigation for an offence or something similar to that. The protocol allows the chief security officer to make a judgement call, provide the police with the footage on the basis of that certification, without the member being asked or approached first. The member would then generally be informed. And the reason for that is that very often the request for the footage is to deal with something that is either just happening or still in

the process or very quickly afterwards. So the quickest response would be the one that we would be looking at there.

And there is a spectrum there. On the one hand we have got instances—for example, like the investigation into Jill Meagher, where police approached lots of commercial premises as well as electorate offices and requested footage, that kind of stuff, traffic accidents—

Mrs McARTHUR: I understand. Sure. Okay. Thank you. Further to Mr Hibbins's questions I would like to understand a bit more about your planning process in the financial year in question relating to the COVID situation. You talk about plans in drawers—all the kind of planning we would expect from responsible organisations, of course. Parliaments around the world have responded to COVID in different ways and many have allowed remote participation—not just in committees, and I have been in committees where we have actually voted—effectively running full parliamentary sessions despite COVID-enforced absence of members. So what plans in the drawers did you have, and did the Parliament of Victoria look into ways of delivering this kind of participation?

Mr YOUNG: Yes. So there was lots of drafting done I think in both house departments around potential sessional orders that would facilitate not only remote participation by members but perhaps even voting online. I think one thing to remember is no jurisdiction in Australia was impacted by COVID more than Victoria, but if you compare Victoria to the New South Wales Parliament, I think the temporary orders and sessional orders that have been put in place have been proven to be effective because effectively the New South Wales Parliament barely sat between the end of June and late October, early November, whereas the houses here have continued to sit, I think because the orders have worked.

One thing you might be getting at is that move to complete remote participation. I think it is fair to say there was a hesitation by both major parties, the opposition and government, in relation to that because the first place that will really get tested with any meaning is in a court, and that would invalidate legislation if it were ever found that what the constitution really meant is you did need a quorum to be present, physically present, in each chamber. So that was, if you like, I think a caution being exercised by both major parties, and I am not sure if I am answering your question in the way you are hoping.

Mrs McARTHUR: That is fine. So rapid testing was used in Westminster—

Mr YOUNG: And New South Wales.

Mrs McARTHUR: early on. Did this not get pursued here as an idea?

Mr YOUNG: Well, certainly in the Council it was something that the Leader of the Opposition, Mr Davis, flagged and sought leave to move on more than one occasion, but the house did not agree with that proceeding. So that is something where I think we would say that it should be the house that decides that type of matter.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mr Richardson.

Mr RICHARDSON: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Secretary and Parliament officials, for joining us today for the financial outputs hearing. I want to take Bridget to the cybersecurity issue—and that slide was just one step short of some of the weapons that are confiscated that sometimes find their way into briefings. But I want to take you to the challenges associated with cybersecurity, and some of those figures were quite astonishing. Are you able to run through the additional resources being provided to tackle this issue for the outcomes hearings?

Ms NOONAN: Sure. Thanks very much for that, Mr Richardson, and I might throw to my colleague Matt Smith to talk through how his department and his teams have been resourcing that, if that is all right, Matt.

Mr SMITH: Thanks, Bridget. Over the last few years we have obviously recognised a significant growth in the challenges associated with cybersecurity. Within the changes that were imposed upon us by COVID through remote work some of those were even more challenging because we were dealing with an environment that was much less controlled than within the parliamentary network. Over the last couple of years we have had a number of technology upgrades that have enabled us to provide a greater level of security. I am a little bit reluctant to go into too much detail about some of them, but they are all fairly consistent with what the

Australian Signals Directorate would recommend as being required for public sector agencies. Some of those things include commonly used technologies that banks and other corporates use, like multifactor authentication, like better recognition of where connections are coming from and upgrades that give us the ability to detect things better than we have been able to detect them in the past.

The other big thing that we have tried to work on is awareness by humans, because they are far and away our greatest weakness but they are also our greatest potential strength in terms of responding to cybersecurity challenges. It is the awareness of the people using our systems that ‘This does not quite look right; I’m going to check it out. I’m not just going to click that link’ and ‘I don’t remember ordering an iPhone from Amazon’ and ‘I don’t know why I need to provide my bank accounts for a refund’—those sorts of things. Educating people on those, a significant amount of effort is going into that. We have seen an evolution in the tactics that have been used over the last couple of years and certainly the humans are being targeted a lot more than the technology, but we are trying to augment that with technologies, like the ones that Bridget mentioned in her presentation that detect phishing and detect brute force password attacks and the like. We have also increased our resourcing and staffing in the area of cybersecurity, so there is a dedicated team that is now looking after cybersecurity.

Mr RICHARDSON: Fantastic. Thank you. I might take you to the topic of the *Gender Equality Act 2020*. As mentioned in the presentation, I am wondering if you can provide for the committee’s benefit the sorts of actions that the Department of Parliamentary Services has implemented in the gender equity and equality outcomes in your department.

Mr LOCHERT: We might hand over to Anne Sargent. The response that the parliamentary department is structuring is actually across the three departments, and Anne is leading it at the moment

Ms SARGENT: Thanks, Peter. The action plan that is required under the legislation is not actually due until 31 March next year, so we have got a workshop planned for this Friday coming to actually start putting our action plan together. We have done our internal consultation with all of our staff here in the last couple of weeks—so we ran six consultation sessions and a webinar in relation to this. Our data is due by 31 December, so our data of all of the various legislative requirements. Our action plan will be based on the consultations that we have done. We are working with the gender Equality Institute. They helped us put together some of the themes that they will pick up from those consultations. We will put those in our action plan and then put, I suppose, some recommendations and implementations around how we can try and improve in some of those areas.

Mr RICHARDSON: Fantastic. I might leave it there, Chair. Thanks very much.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Richardson. That concludes the time we have set aside for consideration with you all today, so thank you very much today for appearing before the committee. 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 also thank all secretaries and officers who have given evidence to the committee today, as well as Hansard, the secretariat, the security and cleaning staff and others who have assisted us. The committee will resume consideration tomorrow of the 2020–21 financial and performance outcomes. I declare this hearing adjourned. Thank you for your time.

Committee adjourned.