

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2024–25 Financial and Performance Outcomes

Melbourne – Friday 28 November 2025

MEMBERS

Sarah Connolly – Chair
Roma Britnell – Deputy Chair
Jade Benham
Michael Galea
Mathew Hilakari

Lauren Kathage
Aiv Puglielli
Meng Heang Tak
Richard Welch

WITNESSES

Peta McCammon, Secretary,
Rachael Green, Acting Deputy Secretary, Disability, Fairness and Emergency Management,
Danny O'Kelly, Deputy Secretary, Community Operations and Practice Leadership,
Annette Lancy, Deputy Secretary, Children and Families,
Simon Newport, Chief Executive Officer, Homes Victoria,
Melanie Heenan, Deputy Secretary, Family Safety Victoria,
Raylene Harradine, Deputy Secretary, Aboriginal Self-Determination and Outcomes,
Ben Richardson, Acting Deputy Secretary, System Reform, Workforce and Engagement,
Drew Warne-Smith, Acting Deputy Secretary, Corporate and Delivery Services,
Cynthia Lahiff, Chief Financial Officer,
Gerry Goswell, Executive Director, Community Inclusion, Veterans and Youth,
Michele Clark, Acting Executive Director, Equality, Seniors, Women and Equity Strategy,
Mark Stracey, Executive Director, Homelessness and Housing Support,
David Atkinson, Executive Director, Child Protection and Care Policy, and
Jane Sweeney, Executive Director, Family Services, Evidence, Redress and Lived Experience, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing.

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

On behalf of the Parliament, the committee is conducting this Inquiry into the 2024–25 Financial and Performance Outcomes. Its aim is to gauge what the government, the courts and the Parliament achieved in 2024–25 compared to what they planned to achieve.

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

All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard and is broadcast live on the Parliament's website. The broadcast does include automated captioning. Members and witnesses should be aware that all microphones are live during hearings and anything you say may be picked up and captioned, even if you say it very quietly.

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

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.

I welcome the Secretary of the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing Peta McCammon as well as other officials who have joined her here today. Secretary, I am going to invite you to make an opening statement or presentation of no more than 10 minutes, and this will be followed by questions from the committee.

Peta McCAMMON: Thank you, Chair and committee, for the opportunity to present on the financial and performance outcomes for the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing for 2024–25. I would like to

begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting today, the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung people, and pay my respects to elders past and present.

Visual presentation.

Peta McCAMMON: Our department is proud to mark another year of delivering services to Victorians. We are seeing more people experiencing vulnerability, discrimination and disadvantage, but as you will see from this slide, amid this growing demand our department's vision remains unchanged – to ensure that children and families are safe and supported in stable homes and within strong communities. In this presentation I will talk through how we are addressing each of these, but first I want to look at some of the challenges.

One of the most pressing challenges across the board is the demand for government services. For DFFH this includes family violence incidents increasing by 7.7 per cent to over 106,000. There are over 9000 children and young people in state care on any given day. Of these, Aboriginal children are over-represented by a factor of more than 20. 1.34 million people live with a disability in Victoria, there are over 750,000 unpaid carers across the state and child protection reports are up by 8.6 per cent compared to 2023–24.

Against this picture of community demand, the department remains committed to making Victoria a safer, fairer and more inclusive place. In 2024–25 we have worked hard to respond to growing community needs and have expanded several key services and programs to meet this need, as shown in this slide. In the face of rising child protection reports, the number of investigations increased by 15 per cent, and we delivered family services to 19,854 families. We opened more than 300,000 cases to assist people through the Orange Door, and positively, 30 per cent of people accessing the Orange Door do so directly through self-referral, illustrating that more people are aware of the supports on offer through this service. We provided more than 550,000 hours of respite and support for carers, we supported 231,390 households with utility relief grants, we issued 8841 bond loans to help low-income Victorians access the private rental market and on any given night in Victoria 111,000 people now rely on us for the safety and security of a home. Frontline service delivery continues to be a priority for the department, as we work hard to improve the lives of Victorians and help them meet basic needs. As noted, housing continues to be a priority area, and in 2024–25 we provided 2392 new social homes and 286 new affordable homes, which created over 47,000 jobs.

Food security is another identified and growing issue, and in the last year we provided 116 grants to boost food security and deliver food relief. In the disability space, we funded 21 disability advocacy agencies, including two resource units, and provided additional funding to assist an additional 800 Victorians with a disability. Family violence is another area seeing growing demand for supports and services, and in 2024–25 137,000 family violence risk assessments and safety plans were undertaken by professionals across health, education, justice and community services supported through use of the multi-agency risk assessment and management framework, guidance and tools. We also established a dedicated centralised child sexual exploitation response team to work alongside sexual exploitation practice leaders in complex and high-profile matters. This centralised team provides professional development, updated practice guidance and tactical intelligence support. We are also cognisant of the need to grow and upskill the social service workforce in all parts of the state, so we provide 30 scholarships to rural and regional disability support workers through the community and social services graduate program.

I will now turn to the five objectives I mentioned earlier and talk through each of them. The first of these is Aboriginal voice knowledge and cultural leadership driving policy, legislation and system reform. Here I can state unequivocally that the department works incredibly hard to embed Aboriginal self-determination in everything we do. This is why throughout 2024–25, we engaged deeply and transparently with the Yoorrook Justice Commission and prepared for treaty negotiations. We have continued to work to embed self-determination across our work and in partnership with the Aboriginal Strategic Governance Forum, the department's Aboriginal-led governance structure. We also provided flexible funding promoting Aboriginal leadership, culture and community and other grants to support Aboriginal youth, maternal and child health and help Aboriginal women recover from family violence.

We have also continued the Wungurilwil Gapgapduir and Aboriginal children's forum, which has developed a new four-year strategic action plan. The Aboriginal Children in Aboriginal Care program has also been a highlight this year, and it continues to deliver, allocating four additional teams to allow services to 144 Aboriginal children. The department is responsible for the delivery of statutory child protection and care

services, and the services and supports to prevent family violence. In 2024–25, our child and family services experienced significant demand, with over 150,000 reports made to child protection services, a 9 per cent increase on 2023–24. We undertook over 186 assessments at the Orange Door, which was around 10,000 more than in 2023–24, and provided more than 20,000 sexual assault support services. Family services and supported playgroups were attended by over 33,000 families.

In 2024–25, the government launched the Victorian redress for historical institutional abuse and provided a commitment of over \$165 million in the 2024–25 budget to deliver redress for people who experienced physical, psychological or emotional abuse in institutional settings. We launched the Safe at Home program pilot, supporting 54 victim-survivors of family violence to stay in their homes, and we completed construction of the 16th core and cluster refuge for family violence victim-survivors. This past year has also seen improved outcomes for children and young people in care, including educational and health supports, and HousingFirst, which provides important supports for young people who are leaving care. We have also continued a campaign of targeted recruitment, including 198 tertiary student placements as part of the child protection student placement program.

A core aspect of our work as a department is to solidify and strengthen social cohesion in Victoria. In 2024–25 this has included funding for six community support groups supporting more than 2500 young people and their families and supporting more than 1000 at-risk Pasifika young people through Le Mana Pasifika. We have also extended the Living Learning program to keep at-risk students engaged with education, and in the past year we have continued to roll out *Inclusive Victoria: State Disability Plan 2022–26*, providing places for disability liaison officers in health services, among other initiatives. In 2024–25 we also commenced the Australia-first free pads and tampons in public places program, and as of 30 June 2025 there were 313 pad and tampon vending machines installed in Victoria. We have continued to invest in around 400 neighbourhood houses and delivered over 560,000 hours of coordination funding to neighbourhood houses. We further supported and strengthened Victoria’s six regional food shares and the Regional Food Security Alliance, and we established the new Victorian advisory committee which advises government on the lived experience of older Victorians.

The department remains committed to building more and better quality homes and to increasing housing supply to ensure all Victorians have safe, secure and affordable housing. In addition to 2392 new social homes, we have now delivered 286 new affordable homes across Victoria that are safe, modern and comfortable. This brings the total homes commenced under the Big Housing Build and Regional Housing Fund to more than 10,800, including more than 600 homes for Aboriginal Victorians. In 2024–25 we moved more than 6200 households into modern, accessible and energy-efficient homes, including 948 victim-survivors of family violence. We completed 146 homes through the social housing accelerator investment, with a total of 651 dwellings commenced or in planning. This includes the Elgin Towers in Carlton, where 248 new homes will replace 196 old dwellings that are not fit for purpose.

The department has been a key supporter of the social service regulator during the first year of the regulatory scheme. During this time, in collaboration with the regulator, we developed a new information-sharing protocol to ensure efficient, effective and consistent exchange of information. We also delivered the Go Where You’re Needed recruitment campaign to promote child protection careers in regional areas to boost workforce numbers with the highest vacancy rates.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a short summary of the department’s activities in 2024–25. We look forward to answering questions from the committee.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Secretary. I am going to throw first to the Deputy Chair.

Roma BRITNELL: Thank you. Thank you for your presentation, Secretary. My first question: yesterday we were told by the Department of Justice and Community Safety that they did not have this data but that DFFFH did. Can you please tell me how many children in the child protection system in 2024–25 also came before the youth justice system?

Peta McCAMMON: Thanks for the question. I appreciate that this came up yesterday. The data that I have today that I can provide is the number of dual clients – so clients who would be within the child protection system and also a client of youth justice – and I have that data as at the end of May. So in terms of –

Roma BRITNELL: That is for 11 months of the reporting year?

Peta McCAMMON: What I have is at a point in time. So children that are in care – we have approximately 9000 children at any one point of time in care. As at 31 May this year, 155 were dual clients of youth justice –

Roma BRITNELL: Just on that one date.

Peta McCAMMON: On that one date, yes.

Roma BRITNELL: Okay. Can you provide the amount of children who came to the two departments within that 12-month period of reporting, please? I am happy for you to look into that and provide it to the committee later if you have not got it today.

Peta McCAMMON: Sure. I can see what we can provide, because obviously it is a bit of a dynamic figure. But I am happy to see what we can provide.

Roma BRITNELL: It is, but children who are in child protection should be supervised, obviously, by the state, which is responsible for them. So I imagine if they are getting into trouble with the youth justice system, that data would be certainly captured somewhere.

Peta McCAMMON: Yes. And also not only do we capture the data, but we actually put quite concentrated case management practice in place for those children.

Roma BRITNELL: Anything you can supply would be great, obviously de-identified – we accept that; I understand. You mentioned 9000 children, a bit more I think than in care at any one time at the moment in Victoria; 2023–24 I think those figures were from. Can you tell us the real spending per child in Victoria during that time period for the children in out-of-home care, please?

Peta McCAMMON: Probably the closest we would have is the data that we provide for the ROGS, the report on government services, which is publicly available. Obviously when we talk about children in care, that could be a child in kinship care, that could be a child in foster care, that –

Roma BRITNELL: Yes, I understand the definition of ‘out-of-home care’. I just want the figure overall. But if you could extrapolate out the cost of children in residential care, that would be fantastic.

Peta McCAMMON: Yes, we can see what we already provide. I do not know whether we have that ROGS data today, but otherwise we can see what we can provide.

Roma BRITNELL: If you can extrapolate that out, that would be great.

Peta McCAMMON: Yes.

Roma BRITNELL: Okay. How often does each child see a caseworker? In the year, how many points in time are the children seeing their caseworker, and what is the average time that a child entering child protection has to wait to see a caseworker?

Peta McCAMMON: I think it is a highly variable response, but I might ask Mr O’Kelly to talk to that one.

Danny O’KELLY: Thank you. It depends on circumstances, and I am not sure, when you –

Roma BRITNELL: Perhaps if we could just leave it for children in residential care. How often do they see their caseworker?

Danny O’KELLY: We will not have a stated precise figure. Sometimes their caseworkers are actually contracted workers, so a case manager from one of our funded agencies where we have got contracted case management.

Roma BRITNELL: So that means you do not know because it is the contractor’s determination how often they see them?

Danny O’KELLY: No, it means providing an exact figure in terms of how often every child in residential care is visited by a case manager –

Roma BRITNELL: That is not documented? If you cannot provide us data, I would be very surprised.

Danny O'KELLY: We would need to take that on notice.

Roma BRITNELL: That is absolutely fine.

Danny O'KELLY: It would not be easy to extract that data out of –

Roma BRITNELL: No, that is fine. Take it on notice. I am very happy with that. Thank you.

Danny O'KELLY: For children in residential care it is more regular than for children in other circumstances.

Roma BRITNELL: I will move on, but that is great; thank you for providing that on notice. The Department of Families, Fairness and Housing's annual report states that 97 per cent of child abuse allegations deemed as urgent were visited or attempted to have been visited within two days of the report. How many were not visited, and what number is represented by that 3 per cent that were not visited in the two days?

Danny O'KELLY: Again, I would have to take that on notice.

Roma BRITNELL: Okay. If you can turn those percentages into numbers, then provide that.

Danny O'KELLY: If you look at the numbers that are available around those deemed urgent, there are a number of reasons why those deemed urgent are not visited within –

Roma BRITNELL: Abuse is urgent. I understand that. Your figure is 97 per cent – it is just that 3 per cent and how many that constitutes as a number.

Danny O'KELLY: Ninety-seven per cent is the indicator for us that we try and hit. There are circumstances where we learn more and a situation that might not have been deemed urgent at the intake phase changes.

Roma BRITNELL: My question is really about how many were not visited and what number is represented by that 3 per cent.

Peta McCAMMON: Just to be clear, that is a time measure. That is saying: of those children or young people who have been deemed as urgent, how many have been visited within two days? The answer is on average 97 per cent, which is –

Roma BRITNELL: Yes, I am asking for that to be translated into numbers.

Peta McCAMMON: But that does not mean those children have not been visited. That is a measure of how many of those have been visited within two days, and as Danny said, that is within our KPIs. I do not want to give the committee the impression that means that 3 per cent of children have not been visited.

Roma BRITNELL: Okay. All right. Thank you. And thank you for taking that detail on notice to provide to the committee. How many nights did children in care spend in hotels or similar accommodation, such as caravan parks and Airbnbs, and what is the cost of that?

Danny O'KELLY: Children in care – we will only use a hotel or an arrangement like that when we have got an emergency circumstance that means –

Roma BRITNELL: I understand. But we do know that demand has got higher, so that is why I want the specifics around where we are at now with how many children are having to use these extraordinary forms of accommodation in an emergency.

Danny O'KELLY: I do want to stress they are not used as medium- to long-term forms of accommodation. We only ever use those options for children –

Roma BRITNELL: For two weeks?

Danny O'KELLY: No, for less than that. More often than not it might be for a young person where we have had to take out an order at 11 o'clock at night.

Roma BRITNELL: Okay. My question, though, is about how many nights. I would be really interested to see if you have got that data, because I have had cases where they have been in caravan parks for some time. You are right, it is not months, but it is a long time for children. So it would be great if you could provide that information for me.

Danny O'KELLY: We can take that on notice.

Roma BRITNELL: Thank you.

Danny O'KELLY: And if you are aware of circumstances where we have got young people in caravans for weeks and months, we would obviously be very keen to –

Roma BRITNELL: Yes, it was not months. I understand that page 46 of the CCYP annual report states that there were 334 incidents of sexual abuse in 2024–25. Can you provide the age breakdown or average age of the children involved in these incidents and whether they relate to more than one incident per child?

Danny O'KELLY: In terms of age breakdown, we would have to take that on notice.

Roma BRITNELL: Okay. How many children in the child protection system year to date were sexually exploited?

Danny O'KELLY: In the period that we are –

Roma BRITNELL: Year to date.

Danny O'KELLY: So are we talking about the period that the estimates committee is looking at, or are we looking at –

Roma BRITNELL: I have asked about the period, and you are providing that data. But this is obviously worrying and concerning. How many children from then till now?

Peta McCAMMON: I think we would have to, in terms of –

Danny O'KELLY: Yes, I would have to take that on notice. I have not –

Roma BRITNELL: Okay. Thank you.

Peta McCAMMON: I think, to be clear, though, the CIMS data is obviously an important system for us to understand where there are incidents that have happened in care and also to understand then the actions that have been taken. The CCYP does report pretty transparently in terms of itemised CIMS data, which actually talks to those numbers. Whether then we can break that down to individual children I think we would have to take on notice.

Roma BRITNELL: Thank you.

Peta McCAMMON: As per my presentation, we are aware of this as a risk for children in care, and there is a lot of work that has happened in 2024–25, which the CCYP recognises.

Roma BRITNELL: I will come to ask you a bit more about that soon if that is okay. I appreciate that. Can you advise how many children went through the state's pathways to good health program, which I understand children are supposed to go through when they enter the child protection system. Have all the children been screened under the pathways to good health program when they enter the program or re-enter the program?

Peta McCAMMON: I know I do not have that data with me today. I am not sure whether –

Danny O'KELLY: We will have to take that on notice.

Peta McCAMMON: We will take that on notice for you.

Roma BRITNELL: Okay. Can you tell me: were there any pregnancies found during the time that children were re-entered into care or in care? Were any babies born to children in the child protection system in that year?

Peta McCAMMON: In terms of children and young people who have been in the care of the state for the 2024–25 year, yes, we are aware of circumstances where those young people were –

Roma BRITNELL: So you will be able to give me the figures on how many?

Peta McCAMMON: Yes. I think we just have to be careful about de-identifying.

Roma BRITNELL: I would not ask for that information to threaten any child, no.

Danny O'KELLY: We just have to be careful that it is not such a small number that it does in fact identify the children.

Roma BRITNELL: Yes. What other health issues were detected? If a child is in the system year in, year out during their time, are they checked every year? And how many children were found to have sexually transmitted diseases or alcohol or drug addiction?

Peta McCAMMON: I definitely know we do not have that data. I think again we are getting pretty close to some pretty personal information around young people in care. I am happy to take that on notice, but I am just mentioning –

Roma BRITNELL: Well, we know that children in care are being sexually exploited. Predators are hanging around outside residential care facilities. That has been reported by the CCYP year in, year out. You talked about the program for complex and high-profile matters, but it is more than just high-profile matters. They are all complex. These are young people, and I know from what one provider told me that not all children but that certainly almost all girls in care are being sexually exploited. That is why I think with what has been going on in the childcare system that people are interested in these sexually transmitted diseases, perhaps.

Peta McCAMMON: If the committee is interested, we are happy to talk to the work of the exploitation practice leads, because they have been a really incredible resource.

Roma BRITNELL: Can you provide that? If you cannot –

Peta McCAMMON: I am happy to answer that. I am happy to provide detail now, because as I said –

Roma BRITNELL: You cannot provide the figures.

Peta McCAMMON: Not right now, as I said, and I am being cautious about committing to what I can provide, given the detailed medical information about these young people that you are seeking.

Roma BRITNELL: I understand that.

Peta McCAMMON: But I also am keen to impress upon the committee that the work that the sexual exploitation practice leads do within the child protection system is not just work with the child protection system. These are criminal offences that you are talking about, so the work is also –

Roma BRITNELL: I would have thought so, actually; I would have thought sexual abuse was that.

Peta McCAMMON: Yes. So the work is actually incredibly important that we do with Victoria Police in terms of gathering information –

Roma BRITNELL: Victoria Police tell me it is because the children are often made addicted to drugs deliberately within the system – not by the department but by the way it works – and that these children then do not report the sexual abuse and therefore the police cannot act. But these are children who are 13 and 14 who are being preyed upon whilst in the state's care. That is why I am really concerned about the statistics of such horrible diseases, as I have mentioned. If you could just give me the stats, if you are able, that would be appreciated. I will move on, though. I understand the sensitivity around this issue.

Can I ask you about the child protection workforce? How many child protection jobs are vacant at this time?

Peta McCAMMON: I can answer as of 30 June.

Roma BRITNELL: Yes.

Peta McCAMMON: I know I definitely have this. I think it is 300-and-something. Let me find it. As at 30 June the vacancy rate was – I know we have got it. Danny, do you –

Roma BRITNELL: Rather than waste time, because we do have a very short amount of time and I am struggling to get the answers I need –

Peta McCAMMON: Sure. We will try and find it in the break.

Roma BRITNELL: Okay. Thank you. What is the staff turnover in the period discussed within child protection? How many staff left within that year? Again, if you have not got that information right now and want to provide that on notice, I can continue with my questions.

Danny O'KELLY: We will provide the exact figures. What we are seeing is a reduction in the turnover rate, and the things we are doing in the retention space are starting to take effect.

Roma BRITNELL: Good.

Danny O'KELLY: The retention rate and turnover rate are dropping to around that 9 to 10 per cent mark, which from an industry perspective is pretty good in terms of other comparative areas.

Roma BRITNELL: I would really love figures rather than percentages, because these are children and I do not like talking about them as percentages; I like to talk about them as people we care about – very vulnerable individuals in fact. What are the wait times for children needing a caseworker, please?

Danny O'KELLY: ‘Wait times’ is not the language that is used around child protection. What is happening in child protection is there are two circumstances that are at play. One of them is that you are in the process of investigation and assessing circumstances. There is a team manager who is overseeing work as it comes in and making risk assessments to determine whether or not an individual caseworker needs to be allocated at that point in time.

Roma BRITNELL: If a child is in residential care, for example, what is the wait time for that? Can you give me that answer?

Danny O'KELLY: If a child is in residential care, they will have a case manager. They will have a case manager in residential care. You cannot come into it –

Roma BRITNELL: Within how long? What is the timeframe?

Danny O'KELLY: Any child that goes into residential care will have had a case manager as part of the process that results in –

Roma BRITNELL: I understand that. But what is the wait time before they first see their case manager when they are in resi care, for example? If you cannot give it to me for foster care or kinship care, then perhaps you could just identify now the wait –

Danny O'KELLY: I am sorry; I am a little bit unclear about what you are asking.

Roma BRITNELL: If a child enters the protection child protection system today and ends up in residential care tonight, when will that child be guaranteed to have a caseworker appointed to her case or his case?

Danny O'KELLY: My answer is: the way the system works is you are not going to be in residential care if you do not have a case manager. Being in residential care is, if you think about that continuum –

Roma BRITNELL: So they all have case managers in residential care and see them regularly.

Danny O'KELLY: In residential care, because part of ending up in residential care is a process that goes through the courts.

Roma BRITNELL: In kinship care and foster care, how long until the child gets to the attention of the system and then has to wait for a caseworker?

Danny O'KELLY: Again, I am trying to think of a scenario where a child ends up entering into foster care or entering into kinship care –

Roma BRITNELL: Without a caseworker.

Danny O'KELLY: without a case manager being involved in that process. That is how the system works.

Roma BRITNELL: So if the case managers resign and leave, they are immediately given another case manager, and there are no gaps?

Danny O'KELLY: No. There will be a process of assessment around risk and around urgency. For example, if a young person is in a stable kinship placement where everything is going really well and they have a case manager at that point in time who leaves us –

Roma BRITNELL: So there is no problem with case management and vacancies?

Danny O'KELLY: Sorry?

Roma BRITNELL: There is no problem with case management vacancies; is that what you are saying? I am trying to seek clarification.

Danny O'KELLY: No. In terms of vacancies, we will continue to recruit – part of our challenge in the vacancy space is we introduced a new operating model which introduced more positions, so we have got more capacity to recruit into. It is something that we have to keep on working at with vacancies. Of course we are going to keep trying to recruit more child protection workers and keep them.

Roma BRITNELL: I might move on to foster care. I am just interested in the allowance that foster carers get, who really help our state look after our most vulnerable. Has the department made any recommendations for the increases to these allowances? The allowance has not been increased for a very long time. It is not even keeping up with CPI. It is way behind the rest of the states of our nation. Foster carers are leaving in droves. That is why we have got so many kids in residential care, because we do not have the loving arms of families to put around them. Has the department made recommendations to increase these allowances to the minister?

Peta McCAMMON: I just do not think I am in a position to be able to reveal the briefing that we would provide.

Roma BRITNELL: So briefings cannot be provided to this committee to share with us what you recommend as your work to the minister? That is correct – we do not do that?

Peta McCAMMON: Yes. Only –

Roma BRITNELL: Okay. All right. Is this being considered as part of the annual budget process? Surely the department has to understand how much it has got to allocate. I just do not understand how you could not know.

Peta McCAMMON: I cannot reveal deliberations that ministers or government might be having in relation to budget processes, but what I would say about foster care is there is the allowance, which is a contribution that we make in terms of the care. There are also a number of other reflections that we would have in relation to why some of those foster care numbers have reduced, which is not a unique position that Victoria finds itself in. Some of those are around the complexity of the children that are coming into care and the different models of foster care. Some of the work that we have been doing in relation to 2024–25 –

Roma BRITNELL: I am just asking why we are so far behind and whether you are speaking to the minister. I thought briefings – even though all week it has been said they cannot; I do not understand how that

cannot be. They are available on FOIs. Why would it not be appropriate for the community of Victoria to see what it is you are trying to allocate? But that is okay.

We will move on to some family violence issues. There were 114,532 safety plans that were made during the funding period of 2020–21 and 2024–25. By each year of that funding period, how many monitored personal safety devices have been distributed by Orange Door?

Peta McCAMMON: Ms Heenan?

Melanie HEENAN: In terms of safety devices?

Roma BRITNELL: Yes.

Melanie HEENAN: If you are referring to the kinds of initiatives that can be put in place through the personal safety initiative – so for victim-survivors, for example –

Roma BRITNELL: In their personal safety plans, if they were needing to be issued with a personal safety device, how many were issued?

Melanie HEENAN: Those are not the kinds of assessments that would be done in relation to the personal safety initiative. A personal safety initiative really enables –

Roma BRITNELL: Can you just tell me how many devices were issued during that time then or not?

Melanie HEENAN: I cannot give you that figure, but I can –

Roma BRITNELL: Okay. Can you provide that at a later date to the committee, within the –

The CHAIR: Sorry, Ms Heenan. Deputy Chair, I know they are important questions that you are asking. Just afford the witnesses time to answer you. They are genuinely trying to give you information. I think you just need to listen to what they are trying to say. But we will come back to you.

Roma BRITNELL: Point of order.

The CHAIR: We will come back to you.

Roma BRITNELL: Point of order.

The CHAIR: Point of order, Deputy Chair.

Roma BRITNELL: All week my colleagues and I have been trying to get answers. We have been met with interference from government members, non-answers, time wasting. I know you have been saying all week this is my first time on PAEC, but I really am genuinely shocked about the information that is actually not provided that is relevant. It is just that we cannot get any financial outcomes. So I would like to propose that we set another hearing date for 15 December, for the week, so we can actually get to find out how the state of the books are for Victorians. You are telling me here that machete bins have been working, there are no knives on the street, the health system is fine, children in care are all okay. I propose that we meet again and set a new date for a week in December.

Michael GALEA: Further to the point of order.

Mathew HILAKARI: I will grab it.

The CHAIR: I see Mr Hilakari wishes to speak to the point of order.

Mathew HILAKARI: On the point of order, it is not a point of order to propose a new sitting date. There are certainly processes for that. All week you have been unable to work out what this hearing is about, which is the 2024–25 financial and performance outcomes. So you are disappointed that you have wasted your own time a lot of the time in asking questions that are not relevant.

Roma BRITNELL: On the point of order.

Mathew HILAKARI: I understand that is frustrating.

The CHAIR: Excuse me, the member has not finished.

Mathew HILAKARI: If you have a proposal about a different timing of scheduled hearings, there are times to do that. We have got another meeting on Monday. You are welcome to raise it then.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Hilakari.

Roma BRITNELL: Look, I really think there is actually no point. I mean, the people of Victoria want answers. It is a waste of time.

Members interjecting.

Roma BRITNELL: I am leaving.

The CHAIR: Excuse me. Members, I understand it has been a long week, but I will rule on the point of order and note the Deputy Chair has removed herself from the room. The Deputy Chair has been, I believe, a shadow minister for long enough to know the purpose, the procedure and the points of order not only of financial and performance outcomes but also budget estimates, which is something that if she does not understand, I am more than happy, as raised by Mr Hilakari, to discuss at Monday's committee meeting. I do not uphold the point of order. Any proposal to add an additional day for public hearings for the financial and performance outcomes, as the Deputy Chair will soon understand, is something that must be raised at the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee meeting which is scheduled for Monday at 2 pm. Moving on – Mr Galea.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Secretary and officials, for joining us today. I actually do want to touch on some of the same things, because some of these are important topics and deserve a proper response. I do not want to cut you off as soon as you start answering my questions, Secretary. Sexual exploitation of young people in state care is a very serious issue. I know that you touched on it in your presentation as well, but I am very keen to know what has been done in the 2024–25 year to address this issue by the department, what has worked well and what still needs attention.

Peta McCAMMON: I might start and then hand over to you, Mr O'Kelly. We now have sexual exploitation practice leads in all the areas within the state, and they have a number of different roles for us. There is a role to build the capacity and the capability of our whole entire child protection workforce in terms of understanding and identifying sexual exploitation but also in relation to some of our high-risk cases. Danny, do you want to talk to that one?

Danny O'KELLY: Thank you, Secretary. Obviously, exploitation affects children in residential care. It also affects children who are living in other forms of care and children who are living with their parents, who might be involved with child protection. They are some of the most vulnerable kids in the community, often with backgrounds of abuse and trauma, which places them at increased risk of exploitation. We work really, really closely with Victoria Police and others to protect children at risk, and we have been working really hard in this space to target the people who target children who are either in our care or in the care of their parents but who we are still working with. We work really hard to identify and target perpetrators who target kids to exploit them. We have had significant investment in uptick in residential care, because a lot of kids who are targeted do live in residential care. Over the last four years we have had over \$548 million invested to improve outcomes for children in resi care. All of those other things like smaller two-bed units and therapeutic overlay help us to keep kids safe in residential care and help deliver them good outcomes.

We also had an additional \$13.4 million to better target sexual exploitation, which included the expansion of our SEPLs. The first sexual exploitation practice leads we had were in 2015. We originally had four. We went to nine. We have now got exploitation practice leaders in all of our 17 areas, and we have a couple of areas that have more than one. We also have exploitation practice leaders in our after-hours services as well, so we have got coverage around the clock to look at what we are doing to support kids who are being targeted. We have now got a centralised sexual exploitation response team who work across the department, so other parts of DFFH and across our 17 areas and our divisions and with our sector partners, to uplift practice and how we support young people who might be being targeted and, really importantly, to build our intelligence capability, because we want to identify who the people are who are targeting kids that we support. We have gone from

11 SEPLs – apologies for the acronym, exploitation practice leaders – to now actually having 21. We have them in every area, and we have them in our around-the-clock environments as well. We have got a director of our child sexual exploitation response team sitting in the OPP and working directly with our chief practitioner to uplift practice. The team includes principal practice advisers and qualified intelligence analysts, which has been a really important addition for us, particularly as we work together with Victoria Police and our funded agencies to really target the people who are exploiting and targeting the young people that we work with.

The focus of our SEPLs is structured professional development. We have got specialists who work in the exploitation space, but we have also built the capability of our whole child protection workforce to identify and support young people who might be experiencing being targeted by people who exploit, as well as providing work that supports increased capacity in the funded sector to identify and respond. Some of the things that we do include developing risk profiles – so being able to understand who some of the people are – and intelligence products that enhance our investigation. We have disruptive activities – we do some of that work ourselves – so things like harbouring notices and other forms of interventions that we do to make it clear to people that we know, because we share information and we know that they are targeting our people, that we are working with Victoria Police and that we will take action if they do not stop doing the things that they are doing. So we have put a lot of things in place. We have got additional foundational training in place as part of our practice induction program, and we are also obviously doing that work across the funded sector, who are looking after many of the young people who are targeted. We are contemporising all of our tools to be much more effective enablers of things like information sharing with other agencies, particularly with Victoria Police, so that we can identify early when we think a young person might be targeted or at risk of exploitation and enable appropriate monitoring to happen so we can keep a really close eye on what is happening for them and develop responses that are effective.

Our SEPLs, our care team leaders, do other key work, including direct work on cases where police and community services organisations have identified perpetrators. Victoria Police work with us on things like disruption, so how we stop that sort of activity. If there was somebody who we had identified as a risk who was parked out the front of a residential care unit, we would make sure we shared that information with Victoria Police, and we would work together to make sure that there was a response.

Where we do not know who potential perpetrators are, we work really hard at sharing information so that we can find out. We have got very deliberate processes in place across the care services and with our practitioners to always be thinking about what things you can do to help identify who might be targeting the kids who we support. One of the things we have learned over time is that local intelligence and responses are really important but our ability to share that information across the state is also important, because there are people who will target who might be outside local areas. So we share that information with other parts of the system and with Victoria Police so that the police particularly can disrupt and take the action that they need to do and we can do work with the young person around healing and recovering.

We also have implemented a recommendation from the commissioner to introduce a major CIMS report category that increases the focus and awareness on where there is potential grooming happening, so where we do not know that something has definitely happened but we think there is grooming happening. In the reporting period for this PAEC hearing we saw the sector embrace that change and really work hard at identifying where they think there is grooming happening that might lead to exploitation so that we can disrupt earlier, before things get to point where actual abuse might be occurring. We had over 100 reports in that period of our agencies identifying where they think there is grooming happening, and we needed to bring care teams together and think about how we would respond. Just pragmatically, but it is important for us as a system, we have made changes to our shared client information systems so that it is easier for agencies and for us to keep an eye on what is happening for young people.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Mr O'Kelly. It is good to hear the exploitation practice lead has been rolled out to every practice area. Indeed, the data sharing that you were just talking about then is incredibly serious work, and I am sure I speak for everyone here when we wish you absolutely every success in this field that you are working in.

Secretary, if I might turn to workforce concerns across child protection more generally again, there was funding in the 2024–25 budget – budget paper 3, page 37 – for workforce supports. Can you talk to me about how this funding was allocated and what you have been able to deliver with it in the last financial year?

Peta McCAMMON: Yes. And sorry, we might need Mr O'Kelly on this one as well. There was the investment in 2024–25, but there is a whole range of different programs, and I guess ongoing programs as well, that we have to not just attract people to this work – and I just want to acknowledge it is incredibly challenging work, very challenging work, that we ask of our child protection workforce – but to retain them. We have got the Go Where You're Needed campaign. We have got some employment programs – I think we have got our 10-year next week in relation to that – getting graduates in but also making sure, as Danny said before about our new operating model, that there is proper supervision in place and supports in relation to some of the content of the work. It is an incredibly challenging job – you know, new graduates come in and the work that they do at the courts. So there is a whole range of activity, not just that of 2024–25, but I might see if Mr O'Kelly wants to add to that.

Danny O'KELLY: Thank you. There is a lot that we have been doing. Changing the operating model is about a better service for the people that we support. It actually introduced more positions so we have got more people. One of the things that we hear a lot from our workforce is that case carrying capacity is important and we need to make sure that we do not let our caseloads get too big. And CPOM tackles that by making sure we have got consistent structures and organisation across the state. Then within that, we have been able to hold, even though our demand has increased, our caseloads at a level that people feel comfortable with and able to manage. That also has enabled us to really turn our minds to focusing on supervision and development for our workforce. In terms of bringing people in and other supports that we have put in place for them, it is not always about the L and D for the CP workers, but some of it absolutely is. But supporting our vacancies at the 4 and 5 level was where we were really challenged. With our international recruitment, recruits have landed and they are all busily settling into the program here and service delivery here, and we are supporting that cohort to become part of our system.

We got additional resources for our statewide team so that when particular places across the state might be hit by additional demand, we have got central capacity to deploy. That is an important thing in terms of our retention. We also put cultural support advisers into all of the areas and continued their work across all of the areas so that our ability to respond to what we heard through Yoorrook and what we know to be the shortcomings in the work of child protection, particularly around the delivery of cultural support plans – we have got extra workers helping our staff do that. We have put additional paralegals in place to support our staff through the court process. One of our most significant retention challenges for our staff is that courts are intimidating environments, and we needed to better support them in those environments.

Really importantly, we get a lot of really great feedback from our child protection workforce and we have increased the number of kinship engagement coordinators so that work around supporting identification of potential kin placements and then support for those placements comes to fruition. It just takes some pressure off the child protection worker if they do not have to do all of that. And given that in Victoria kinship care is the predominant form of care, most of the kids who are in care in Victoria actually live with their families. It is really important that we continue to support them to have those things in place.

We have also run specific campaigns around recruitment. We are getting near finalising a new supervision model that will help support our staff. We have introduced a new induction program that is twice as long and much more detailed than what we used to call 'beginning practice'. We have introduced that, and we are getting really good feedback from our new employees about more confidence landing in the roles and their ability to do that quickly. That is another area where we have had good feedback. We did, through CPOM and through our last agreement, introduce some specific incentives for places across the state where we had difficulties with recruitment. So we have got things like a retention allowance for hard-to-recruit areas in rural Victoria, and we are seeing that have effect in different places in terms of filling the roles that we need to fill.

In terms of looking after our staff, one of the things we have to make sure we do is look after our people as they come through, particularly as we grow them into leadership roles. We have got our leadership development program, and we have got our graduation next week downstairs. That will continue to grow our leadership capability. It is one of the things that helps us keep skilled staff. We continue to run things like our child protection employment program, where we are bringing students in, so our pipeline is actually quite healthy. Then in terms of their mental health and wellbeing, we are in, I think, year 2 of our mental health and wellbeing program. Given the complexity and the challenging nature of the work, we have got specific supports in place to make sure that when staff and teams deal with really difficult circumstances – and they do deal with really

difficult circumstances – we look after them in a timely way. We invest \$1.2 million a year in our child protection wellbeing program, and it gets good take-up.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Mr O'Kelly. Still in broadly the same space, I do want to touch on the Strong Families, Safe Children initiative that was in the budget for this financial year and has also been reported on on page 6 of the questionnaire, specifically to do with this program's engagement in trying to keep children within families as much as it is reasonable to do so. Can you talk to me about this initiative and where that has been at in the last financial year?

Peta McCAMMON: I think that with Strong Families that might be you, Ms Lancy.

Annette LANCY: Thank you, Secretary. The Strong Families, Safe Children initiative in the 2024–25 budget continued investment across a range of programs on the family services platform. We have services that are focused on connecting families at early stages of need, but I think, Mr Galea, you are particularly focusing on the more intensive services, including partly that initiative, which included \$49 million for an additional almost 1500 families to access Putting Families First and other family services that divert from statutory services. Then there was another \$136.7 million over two years for our family preservation and reunification response. These are our evidence-based intensive supports. They are generally families that have had a referral to child protection but child protection is often able to safely close without seeking to move the children into care as they are able to connect them to a family services provider. They then work really intensively with the family through a dedicated family practitioner to support that family through the range of concerns that may have led them to child protection initially. We are continuing to see really pleasingly good results from the family preservation and reunification response. In 2024–25 that supported over 2000 families through services delivered by 31 community service organisations, as well as 12 ACCOs who are also working under that program and can provide culturally appropriate and adapted Aboriginal family preservation and response.

We are able to use, through another initiative in the 2024–25 budget, what we call VicSIM, which is the large simulation modelling that brings together data from various services, not just DFFH but also health department data and other data. We are able to use that model. We can see from that model when we look at the trajectories of those families that we assisted between September 2020 and March 2023 that we estimate that the family preservation and reunification response diverted 293 additional children from care, so that is 17.3 per cent less children in care.

Michael GALEA: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Lancy. We are going to Mr Welch.

Richard WELCH: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Secretary. Thank you, team. I will start with homelessness. In your presentation you stated that 56,234 eligible applicants had applied for social housing, but only 31,000 were considered urgent. How do you describe the other 25,000 families?

Peta McCAMMON: I think we were going to get Mark Stracey. I think he is referring to the VHR. You are referring to the VHR?

Simon NEWPORT: Are you referring to the waitlist, or are you referring –

Peta McCAMMON: Those numbers, to me, are from the VHR, which is the Victorian housing register. Yes, we have a category of 'urgent'. Danny, you might be best to talk to that one actually.

Danny O'KELLY: We can provide the detail on how each of the categories work, but it is basically an assessment of circumstance. There will be people who are on the VHR who do have housing, and they will not be assessed but it might be unstable housing. There is an assessment process that is happening all the time.

Richard WELCH: For example, would that include people who maybe cannot use stairs but are in a house with stairs and things like that?

Danny O'KELLY: That would not be in and of itself a reason for someone not being categorised as urgent, if they had mobility challenges.

Richard WELCH: Would that qualify them as urgent, or if they had a disability and the house was not suitable for the disability?

Danny O'KELLY: Not in and of itself. It would depend on the other circumstances. If they are housed, then they might not be categorised as urgent. Things like disability, Mr Welch, would be part of the thing that is considered in the assessment of where someone sits on the VHR.

Simon NEWPORT: It is one of the six priority categories.

Danny O'KELLY: Yes.

Richard WELCH: If more than half of the total list is urgent, could you really say that anyone is urgent?

Peta McCAMMON: I guess, as Mr O'Kelly said, it is an assessment of need.

Richard WELCH: Do you sort of get my point?

Peta McCAMMON: Yes.

Richard WELCH: If everyone is urgent, is anyone really urgent?

Peta McCAMMON: I think what we would say is that there are people who are on the VHR who would demonstrate a need for housing. As Mr O'Kelly said, there is a whole range of different reasons why that might be. For example, that category might pick up people in relation to fleeing family violence; that might be a category of urgency. We have talked before, Ms Lancy, around –

Richard WELCH: But I think that misses the point, because I am sure, I have no doubt, that all the reasons that are classified as urgent are genuinely urgent. But if the majority are urgent, then you can see the problem, right, logically. Are some people more urgenter than others?

Peta McCAMMON: Yes.

Richard WELCH: So should there be more tiers then?

Danny O'KELLY: It is a dynamic process, that assessment process. I think –

Richard WELCH: What I am really implying is: is the system is so backed up now that 'urgent' has almost become meaningless in practice?

Peta McCAMMON: I think what we also need to balance is – if you move too much to a system which has almost microlevel categories, these are human circumstances –

Richard WELCH: We are talking more than half, so we are not talking microcategories; we are talking the majority.

Peta McCAMMON: I think it is fair to say that we do not dispute the number of people that are on the VHR who are waiting for housing that have been deemed as urgent.

Simon NEWPORT: Perhaps I can provide a little bit more information.

Richard WELCH: I will move on actually. That is fine. Thank you. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare do monthly monitoring, and they are saying in an average month 58,000 nights of short-term accommodation is provided monthly in Victoria. That is for 4000 clients. So even if we took a very conservative assumption of \$50 per night, that would be around \$35 million a year. Does the \$36 million budget for breaking the cycle of homelessness in the PAEC questionnaire fund all that accommodation?

Peta McCAMMON: No. I think there are some different programs in there, and there are circumstances across the homelessness sector but also the family violence sector where short-term accommodation is a really important part of the system. That calculation – I have to take your word about how you have calculated that, but that is different to the programs that we might have that are specifically in relation to homelessness.

Simon NEWPORT: We housed about 27,000 or 27,500 – I will check the exact number – people in some form of accommodation last year. That is funded from a variety of programs, including the Housing Establishment Fund.

Richard WELCH: Thank you. According to the annual report, only 27,981 people who accessed homelessness services were provided with accommodation in the 2024–25 year but about 48,000 applied. Is that correct?

Simon NEWPORT: Yes.

Richard WELCH: So what happened to the others?

Simon NEWPORT: Probably if you are getting to that level of programmatic detail, I am going to ask the Executive Director for homelessness to come up.

Mark STRACEY: Would you mind repeating the question?

Richard WELCH: 48,000 applications – only 28,000 provided.

Mark STRACEY: When you say ‘applications’, you mean people seeking homelessness support?

Richard WELCH: Yes.

Mark STRACEY: In terms of that, they may look at other options. They may move around to friends’ houses or may look at other options to find alternative places. They may stay where they currently are, or they may have to look into things that are perhaps not quite meeting their needs at this point in time.

Richard WELCH: Do you think that is a satisfactory outcome?

Mark STRACEY: No, which is why we work very actively to get them into public housing and other options as well.

Richard WELCH: So those people would remain in potentially very vulnerable situations or on the street?

Mark STRACEY: They may. It would depend on the individual.

Richard WELCH: With the figures I have – 15,000 homeless people in Victoria each month – how much funding for refuge and crisis accommodation is directly going to building actual extra dwellings?

Peta McCAMMON: Refuge and crisis accommodation are within the family violence – there is funding we have had since the royal commission to establish the refuges. They are for, largely, women who need a –

Richard WELCH: Not the purpose, but is any going specifically to building dwellings?

Peta McCAMMON: That funding for the refuges that is going towards completing the core-and-cluster refuge accommodation – we just completed the 16th.

Richard WELCH: So how many dwellings have been completed?

Peta McCAMMON: For that? The 16th was this year. I do not know how we count the dwellings in the refuges.

Melanie HEENAN: In terms of the refuge redevelopment program, there were to be 22 new refuges that will ultimately be built or refurbished.

Richard WELCH: But how many have been built – how many are completed?

Melanie HEENAN: Sixteen.

Richard WELCH: Sixteen – sorry, I did not hear you.

Peta McCAMMON: Sixteen of those 22.

Richard WELCH: Thank you. Okay. Going to social housing, the Regional Housing Fund was meant to build 30 social and 20 affordable homes in Pound Road, Colac, by 2028. How much funding has been allocated to that project?

Simon NEWPORT: I would have to take that funding on notice.

Richard WELCH: Okay. You may need to take this on notice as well then: does that funding allow for the contamination found on the site?

Simon NEWPORT: Yes.

Richard WELCH: It does?

Simon NEWPORT: Yes.

Richard WELCH: But that has only been recently found.

Simon NEWPORT: Yes. We have a project contingency which is held for each project, and at the moment I am advised that that is sufficient to cover the contamination.

Richard WELCH: Okay. Thank you. The Big Housing Build in 2020 promised to deliver an uplift of 10 per cent in social housing over four years. This would equate to 8600 additional housing dwellings. But in the four years to June 2025 social housing numbers have increased by just 5099, indicating for every two houses gained there are ones lost. So are you meeting the targets?

Simon NEWPORT: Yes, we are. I would also point out that at Homes Victoria we are exceptionally focused on net stock growth, and you will see that there has been a steady improvement in the proportion between the number of homes added gross and the number of homes added net, understanding that every program overlaps. So of course you are not starting everything at once and finishing everything at once. But we are seeing significant growth, and we are on track for the Big Housing Build and regional fund.

Richard WELCH: Yes, but you are not adding stock at the rate, so there is a very large proportion of replacement going on as opposed to addition.

Simon NEWPORT: Well, no. If you have a look at the proportion last year in terms of what ultimately was some form of disposals or offs versus ons, that has improved significantly over the last couple of years.

Richard WELCH: But it is half what you promised.

Simon NEWPORT: No, it is not half of what was promised.

Richard WELCH: Just over half, to be fair.

Simon NEWPORT: Well, the other thing I would point out is that that Big Housing Build and Regional Housing Fund are not the only projects that are going on across Homes Victoria. If you take that purely into account, we are at 6600 homes completed and 11,400 started.

Richard WELCH: Is that also equating to the number of bedrooms? Is it true that three- and four-bedroom homes are being replaced with one- and two-bedroom homes, so there are actually less bedrooms available?

Simon NEWPORT: I predicted this question was coming today. I do not have the data; it is about to be released. But I do understand that bedroom count has gone up this year. So even though 85 per cent of the waitlist is one and two bedrooms, when you have a look at the pure quantum of homes we are delivering, we added more social housing bedrooms last year.

Richard WELCH: How many dwellings did Homes Victoria lease from the private rental market in 2024–25?

Simon NEWPORT: Yes, I have got that number. Sorry, I do not have that number on me. I will find it through the session. I will provide that back to you; I do have it.

Richard WELCH: To my knowledge, rental bidding is illegal in Melbourne and Victoria now. Is that right?

Simon NEWPORT: Yes.

Richard WELCH: So why did the department indulge in rental bidding?

Simon NEWPORT: I do not understand that question.

Richard WELCH: Well, I have got an email here: 'Good morning. Am I able to create a fixed-term tenancy agreement for five years with annual rent increases of 5 per cent with the intent to renew for a further term thereafter?' This is you, the department, requesting that of the direct rental market. It further says:

Most demand is 3 bedrooms Sunshine ... Albion, Ardeer, Braybrook, Maidstone, Maribyrnong, Sunshine, Sunshine North, Sunshine West –

also –

Inner Metro North – Brunswick, Brunswick East, Brunswick West, Carlton, Carlton North, East Melbourne, Kensington, North Melbourne, Mambourin, Princes Hill, West Melbourne.

So it seems to me that the department is using its economic weight to compete directly with renters.

Simon NEWPORT: All large public housing authorities like Homes Victoria will use leasing properties from time to time, whether that is for relocations or any other purposes.

Richard WELCH: On above-market terms?

Simon NEWPORT: No, not above market terms at all.

Richard WELCH: That is not above market terms, offering a five-year lease?

Simon NEWPORT: No. I think –

Richard WELCH: At a 5 per cent increment?

Simon NEWPORT: I think at the end of the day, if you are offering a long-term tenure, which of course our renters really prefer – they would prefer to see some sort of guarantee in place – we do the same in terms of people who are willing to rent their properties to us.

Richard WELCH: In the tightest rental market in living memory, the department is using its weight to offer better terms, longer terms – exactly as you have just said – to outbid the retail market renters.

Simon NEWPORT: I am not aware of any private rents that are offering five-year terms, so I am not sure there is a direct comparison.

Richard WELCH: If your department is offering those terms, shouldn't you know what the market rates are? What are you making that rental rate on the basis of then? Is it hyper-competitive? Is it uncompetitive? Is it below market? Is it above market? Surely you know.

Simon NEWPORT: What I do know is that it is exceptionally difficult in a tight market to be able to rent properties.

Richard WELCH: Yes. Do you think this is making it easier?

Simon NEWPORT: We use it sparingly, but we are also making –

Richard WELCH: Sparingly?

Simon NEWPORT: Absolutely.

Richard WELCH: Tell the people of Albion, Ardeer, Braybrook, Maidstone, Maribyrnong, Sunshine, Sunshine North, Sunshine West, Brunswick, Brunswick East, Brunswick West, Carlton, Carlton North, East Melbourne, Kensington, North Melbourne, Moorabbin, Princes Hill, West Melbourne. Is that sparingly, is it?

Simon NEWPORT: Yes. Look, I understand the program that you are referring to, and obviously part of that is related to towers relocations. We have made an absolute commitment to keep people connected to their community and doing that means locating houses where they would like to live.

Richard WELCH: Getting to the front of the queue.

Simon NEWPORT: In terms of priority, they are there anyway because transfer applications for relocations are part of it.

Richard WELCH: Right. They are ahead of everybody else.

Simon NEWPORT: No. They are not ahead of it, but they are part of a priority queue.

Richard WELCH: I will move on. The ground lease rental. In the current crisis we have 67,000 applicants on the housing register –

Simon NEWPORT: That includes transfers as well. Sorry to interrupt, but that includes transfers.

Richard WELCH: Okay. Thank you. Why did the department not consider building this housing themselves, providing 2300 social homes instead of only 1288 social homes under the ground lease models?

Simon NEWPORT: Sorry, can you repeat the question?

Richard WELCH: Okay. You could have built 2300. You built 1288 under the ground lease models. Is that correct?

Simon NEWPORT: I am not sure I understand the premise of the question. Are you talking about ground lease model in isolation?

Richard WELCH: Yes.

Simon NEWPORT: In fact there are two ground lease models that are already in place, and another one obviously that has been announced with the first three towers.

Richard WELCH: How many residences have they provided and how many bedrooms?

Simon NEWPORT: I do not have the bedroom count, but let me go through the ground lease model in terms of statistics. Let me just see if I can find that here. Ground lease models 1 and 2 will deliver 2740, and obviously they are one-, two-, three- and four-bedroom homes with a mix of social, affordable, market rent and specialist disability accommodation.

Richard WELCH: Okay. Did I understand it costs nine times more to build social housing under the ground lease models than for, say, the Flemington redevelopment? Is that true?

Simon NEWPORT: Sorry, it costs how much extra?

Richard WELCH: Nine times more under the ground lease model than for the Flemington development.

Simon NEWPORT: I am not sure where you are getting that number from.

Richard WELCH: All right. I will move on.

Simon NEWPORT: Just to point out, the Flemington redevelopment is a ground lease model.

Richard WELCH: I have got a couple of questions about Parentline. Was Parentline performing badly over the reporting period?

Peta McCAMMON: No, but what we have seen for the last couple of years with Parentline is a reduction in the calls. I think within the last three years it was about – I should not guess the number. We have seen a reduction in the number of calls that have gone to Parentline, but I would not characterise that it was performing badly.

Richard WELCH: So who made the final decision to withdraw the funding and to close it?

Peta McCAMMON: The government.

Richard WELCH: The government – the minister?

Peta McCAMMON: It is a decision as part of the budget process.

Richard WELCH: From whom did you receive the instruction?

Peta McCAMMON: We receive outcomes from a number of government decisions, cabinet committees; I cannot remember who told me. It is clear and it is transparent: there has been a decision to close Parentline.

Richard WELCH: But you were not unhappy with its performance?

Peta McCAMMON: I would probably reiterate what I said, in that what we have noticed in the last couple of years is that the number of calls that have gone into Parentline have been reducing. We also acknowledge that since Parentline was established – which was a long time ago, in 1998 – a number of different services are now available for people. But as I said, in the last couple of years we have seen a decline in the number of calls going to Parentline

Richard WELCH: Was there any independent review, cost-benefit analysis or stakeholder consultations undertaken before that decision was made?

Peta McCAMMON: Not that I am aware of.

Richard WELCH: None? None at all?

Peta McCAMMON: I mean, over time – I am sure within the period of time.

Richard WELCH: Within the year?

Peta McCAMMON: Not that I know of.

Danny O'KELLY: Not in the period of the hearings. What we were seeing was a reduction. There was a 17 per cent reduction in demand for Parentline from 2021–22 to the last financial year, which we are looking at today.

Richard WELCH: So not a drastic decline.

Danny O'KELLY: It was at the same time where for almost every other activity we were seeing upticks, so it was decreasing when the demand for other things was increasing. And over time we have introduced other types of services to respond.

Richard WELCH: Did the department assess the risk to vulnerable families, for example, those in rural areas, First Nations families or parents of children with disabilities who rely on Parentline, especially given that the counsellors say callers often identify as First Nations or parents of children with special needs?

The CHAIR: Apologies, Mr Welch. I will come back to you. Ms Kathage.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you so much. Chair, Secretary and officials. Before I go on to ask more questions about housing, I do just want to clarify and maybe reflect on conversations I have had with people in my electorate, including the council of single mothers, about the benefit of five-year leases and the standard practice of entering into five-year leases by agreement of what the rent will be for each of those five years. I think that introduction has been really fantastic, especially for renters who want to keep their kids at the same primary school without having to move around every six months. The requirement for five-year leases under the build-to-rent scheme has also been a really positive development for Victoria, and it has absolutely no relationship to rental bidding whatsoever.

Housing continues on regardless, so I want to ask about the Big Housing Build and regional housing as well. We have had questions on that previously today. Page 13 of the annual report speaks a bit to the Regional

Housing Fund and a summary of some of the projects. How many jobs have been created or supported through those programs?

Peta McCAMMON: While Simon is going through his folder, in my presentation we estimated about 47,000 jobs in relation to those programs. Mr Newport might also want to just clarify some of the numbers in relation to those two programs as well.

Simon NEWPORT: All right. I can certainly speak to the Big Housing Build and the success of both that and the Regional Housing Fund, if that is okay. As I intimated earlier, where we sit at the moment is 11,400 homes have commenced already. We are chasing 13,300, so we are well on our way to starting everything. We are about 85 per cent the way through committed; 6600 have already been completed. These include developments in areas like Markham Avenue in Ashburton, Dunlop Avenue in Ascot Vale, Tarakan Street in Heidelberg West and of course Bills Street in Hawthorn. These developments alone created 381 social homes and 323 affordable homes. We have just discussed the ground lease model. Ground lease model 2 is delivering 1370 new homes across Prahran, South Yarra, Port Melbourne and Hampton East, and of course people are now moving in to the freshly finished properties at Elizabeth Street, North Richmond, where we built more than 140 quality homes. Of course we have got two large projects of 100 homes in Heidelberg West and 120 at Banksia Gardens in Broadmeadows as well, which are now well underway. When completed, the Big Housing Build will deliver the 10 per cent uplift as promised. Of course in regional Victoria more than 4000 homes have already been commenced, and 2200 have been completed.

Local communities are consulted as we do all of our work and provide input to inform designs and applications for planning approvals across all of these sites. We continue to engage with communities whenever we deliver a project. I would also like to highlight that the Big Housing Build provides a minimum investment guarantee to 18 regional local government areas, and with three years to go, we now have completed 17. Seventeen of those 18 have either been met or exceeded.

Lauren KATHAGE: And I guess there is a bit of a boost for the local economy in the building of those homes. Do we have a figure?

Simon NEWPORT: Definitely. With 4000 homes in the regions, yes, it is definitely having an impact in the regional economies.

Lauren KATHAGE: Yes. And do we have any insights into the construction benefits for local subbies or jobs created?

Simon NEWPORT: Yes. Of course we comply with all of the Local Jobs First codes, so when we are building we are using, where we can, local builders and local trades and local suppliers.

Lauren KATHAGE: Okay. I did not know that. That is great, thank you. Further from home: Canberra and the Commonwealth government – we are in a bit of a partnership with them now, which is great to be walking in the same direction. There is some information on page 49 of the annual report about that – about the continued delivery of homes as a partnership. What have we been able to achieve working together with Canberra?

Simon NEWPORT: Whilst I get my notes, the short answer is a great deal. Of course we note on Sunday – I hope people do not mind me calling the Housing Australia Future Fund ‘HAFF’ – that HAFF 3 was announced. Of course we are very grateful for the creation of that fund, the \$10 billion Housing Australia Future Fund, and more recently the National Housing Infrastructure Facility. As at the end of the financial year, the first two rounds of HAFF have been approved. Across the country there were nearly 9300 social and about another 9300 affordable. Now, Victoria represents about 25 per cent of the population. Victoria was successful in getting 31 per cent of those houses, so we are punching well above our weight. Of course the team is working very hard already on HAFF 3. We have already completed our first build. That was Housing Australia Future Fund round 1, and that was in a partnership with Pace Development Group and Evolve. That was for 85 new homes, which have since been handed over and are now being filled in Sunshine. Applications for round 2 opened on 16 December last year and closed in January, and I am proud to say that Victoria was successful in securing its full complement of 1275 social housing dwellings. This represents \$991 million from the federal government and \$360 million from the Victorian government across both rounds. Round 2 will also include redevelopment of ageing estates in areas like Bronte Court in Williamstown, Noone Street in Clifton

Hill, the aforementioned vacant block of land next door to the current development at Dunlop Avenue in Ascot Vale and we also have works at Alamein Avenue in Ashburton. In total we will deliver more than 400 extra social homes.

Beyond the Housing Australia Future Fund, because it is not the only Commonwealth partnership we have, we have also the social housing accelerator program, which was announced two years ago. Of course it is the contributing funder for the first tower redevelopment, which is the Carlton tower, which is replacing 196 social housing units with 248 brand new units. We are down to I think floor 11 in the demolition, and we have now signed a contract with the tier 1 builder Lendlease. They are expected to get the site around about March, April of next year, and they will start construction. So we are ahead of schedule, and we will deliver those houses by the timeframe of 2028. In fact I am quietly confident we will do a little bit better than that.

Lauren KATHAGE: Some of these social homes are for the most vulnerable. I see that a site in Colac has come up against some opposition, but hopefully progress will be made against those who seek to turn it into a political issue so we can get on and get those homes built for people there that need them. You have got a very large portfolio that you are dealing with, Mr Newport, for Homes Vic. What are you basing decisions on when you come to think about are we rebuilding, are we demolishing, are we maintaining? What is that decision-making based on?

Simon NEWPORT: What I would say is clearly we are not the largest – New South Wales being the largest – we are the second-largest landlord in the country. We are running an immediate portfolio of about 65,000 and a combined portfolio with community housing of about 91,000, so it is a vast job valued at around about \$37 billion. It would put us well and truly up there in terms of size with regard to the stock market. We have a dedicated team who looks after our asset management function. They go through various decision-making processes. First of all, we must make sure that we keep the properties in good condition – at a minimum, clean, safe and habitable. We must comply with the *Residential Tenancies Act*, which we do, of course. We also make sure that we do our safety checks when we are supposed to do them – very important.

We also run planned and cyclical maintenance programs. I would point out that we had a target last year of 1500 upgrades, and we did well over 1700 last year, so we well and truly exceeded that. We missed out by 15 last year, which was only 1 per cent, and I made sure the team understood that 99 per cent was not good enough. They absolutely hit the target and then some this year. Close enough is not good enough in this regard when we are talking about the safety of Victorians. The team go through and do a detailed analysis, which we share with our colleagues in the department, and we sit and make joint decisions with regard to what properties we will upgrade, what properties we will redevelop, what we will hold in the short-term and what we may well divest. Particularly if properties do not offer development opportunity or do not have the structure to be maintained long term, we often will dispose of those. We keep that to an absolute minimum, and you will see that sales between this year and last year have halved, so we are doing everything we can. I would also point out, if people do not mind – I have got those figures for leasing, and actually the number of properties that we leased last year went down by about 50. So whilst we did lease properties last year –

Lauren KATHAGE: 50 per cent or 50 –

Simon NEWPORT: Fifty properties down. We actually leased 107 properties and handed back 146, so whilst I do not accept the premise that we are impacting the rental market whatsoever, actually our footprint in terms of lease properties has gone down. It is still an invaluable tool that we need to use to manage a portfolio and urgent need where we do. In terms of the way that we manage that portfolio, we also are developing local area plans across the 17 districts, making sure that we have bespoke arrangements in place for all areas of the state. Along with our portfolio optimisation model, which is a supply and demand model – we do not just use the waitlist; we also take into account demographic information from the census and other information to develop what we should build, where we should build it and when we should build it – that informs whether that is budget bids and informs the work for the Big Housing Build and the Housing Australia Future Fund. The reason why we have been so successful in bidding and punching above our weight compared to the rest of the country is because we are making sure we are investment-ready, so that hard work that the team does behind the scenes is paying dividends for people.

Of course in terms of the day-to-day management of the properties, we receive around about a thousand orders every single day of the year, so between 350,000 and 360,000 orders for maintenance, of which about 120,000

are urgent. We run, again, a dedicated call centre in Morwell that is staffed by people including ex-trades. We brought ex-trades in to be able to handle the more complex queries. I would also point out that we have now got the ability for renters to take photographs and videos and share them with us, and that has sped up approval times for work. It has also improved efficiency because we are able to send the right trade out at the right time and not waste people's time or money, which is incredibly important. There is more to do, there is no question. It is an ageing portfolio and we are mindful of making sure we spend taxpayers dollars wisely, but we have a dedicated crew that do a very good job.

Lauren KATHAGE: Ever thought of using the Service Victoria app?

Simon NEWPORT: We are working on that. The first job was to get the IT platform up and running, which only launched about six weeks ago, and I certainly have made a commitment to the staff that we will not finish until we have an app that people can use to place their maintenance, and that will be coming, but we want to get our maintenance modernisation done first.

Lauren KATHAGE: That is great. And I think it is also about the dignity of the people in the homes as well, that they have the same ease to report as other people do in the markets. That is really great to hear. Now, the Secretary mentioned before the housing register, and I can see in the annual report for the department on page 48 it says that the average wait time for social housing, for people on the priority list and for people who are being prioritised due to family violence, has declined. I mean, the wait is always longer than we would like it to be, right? Like, there is no low enough number to satisfy us, and so it should not, but what is the work that has gone into bringing down those numbers?

Peta McCAMMON: Just before I hand to Mr Newport, I think it is important to also acknowledge that those numbers have actually gone down at the same time that we are actually seeing increasing demand. So we are, obviously, as you said, always wanting to do better, but particularly when we think about those priority cohorts that are in the annual report, there are people fleeing family violence or people who are at risk of homelessness and obviously the other risks that sit around those people. So to get any of any of that traction – but I would make the point it is in the context of more people seeking our help. But Mr Newport might want to talk about some of the stock that has been coming online.

Simon NEWPORT: Yes. Obviously, we have already talked about the Big Housing Build and the Regional Housing Fund, and I am not sure about the rules, and I do not necessarily wish to table that as evidence, but I carry this document with me everywhere. This document lists each program, and at the moment if you add all of the programs together, including the Housing Australia Future Fund, we are on track to deliver 22,000 new homes. So not only is it Big Housing Build, it is all of the other programs. I carry that around with me everywhere, because I need to make sure that people understand what good work the team is doing, albeit in really challenging circumstances. We are not for a minute suggesting the wait times are at an acceptable level; we acknowledge that they need to come down, and they will come down, and they are starting to come down because of the extra supply. Investment is up; allocations are up – allocations for family violence. The family violence cohort is up 87 per cent over the last three years, and allocations in general are up about 28 per cent. So when you are offering more housing of course, when you have got more supply, you can help more people, and it is as simple as that. The waitlist is coming down. I also point out, and without at any point trying to take credit for the work that Mr O'Kelly's team is doing, that vacant turnaround times for the first time in some years are now below the target of 28 days in terms of how quickly we turn around vacant homes. Whilst we are supposed to stick to the 30 June, I think we are at 27 days there; the latest numbers have got a 22 in front of them, so the teams are doing a fantastic job in making sure, when we can, we turn homes around as quickly as possible. All of that, plus the incredible investment and hard work, is starting to make a difference.

Lauren KATHAGE: That is great to hear. You talked about increasing demand, Secretary: what is driving that demand? Is it the same as it always is, or are you seeing something different about what is happening in the 2024–25 financial year compared to previous trends?

Peta McCAMMON: Yes, and I think obviously some of the well-published data around rentals, the issues with rental costs, costs of living – also in my presentation, one of the demand drivers across all of our systems continues to be family violence. So we did see an increase in family violence that increases into our child protection system and in our social housing system. I might ask Ms Heenan about any incidents, particularly around family violence.

Melanie HEENAN: So to add to those, Secretary, cost of living obviously is part of that equation, but there also has been an increase in confidence from the community to identify or to disclose or report family violence. So that is certainly a positive in terms of people coming forward for support. We can see a real rise in the self-referrals coming into the Orange Door, which is a fantastic indication of the confidence that the community has in the Orange Door. It is visible; it is there at the local level for families to approach, whether it is a family violence issue that is presenting or a child wellbeing concern that might be presenting. We do know from the Crime Statistics Agency data in relation to family violence that there is an increase in what they refer to as 'prolific offenders' – so as a proportion of that increase in family violence, that disproportionately includes prolific offenders. What I mean by that is some offenders are repeatedly offending. They are not necessarily the most serious-risk offenders, but they are causing harm, obviously. But they have seen that trend in their data.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you. I am interested in prevention or early intervention. There is some information on page 48 of the annual report about early intervention and family violence. But in terms of other ways of addressing or preventing homelessness, of the people that are recorded in the annual report or under those stats there – basically, the success rate – how many are ending up on the waitlist and how many are supported to maintain tenancies, or to not end up there?

Peta McCAMMON: I do not know whether we would be able to say the exact. But I think – and I can see Mr Newport is ready here – to your point, obviously social housing is one really important part of the system, but we have other parts of the system, including our assistance in terms of keeping people within private rental. We have some financial assistance there, also bond assistance, so sometimes that can be a really big barrier for people to actually be able to pay for their bond. So there are a whole range of other supports that we have in place. But I will hand to Mr Newport.

Simon NEWPORT: I do not need to say too much more, because between Ms McCammon and Mr Stracey they have talked about the multiple pathways that we offer to people. Out of those 102,000, about 6134 applications were added to the 'homeless with support' category. Out of that, just over half were actually allocated social housing. So when they come into the system and they are allocated on the priority waitlist as homeless with support, about half the people are actually able to be housed now – acknowledging that is not the only pathway. We do provide other pathways, whether that is private rental assistance, any form of emergency accommodation or other forms of support. But it is an important pathway into housing, whether that is public or community or any form of support we can offer them.

Lauren KATHAGE: And sometimes it is just really practical. I know, when I used to manage a tenancy sustainability program, sometimes we would be there just helping clean the house so they did not get kicked out of their private rental. It is practical supports that can really make a difference.

Simon NEWPORT: The private rental assistance program is exceptionally valuable, and it just gives some flexibility to providers to be able to help people, sometimes with a very small amount of money, to help them, because sustaining tenancies for us is what it is all about.

Lauren KATHAGE: Yes, 100 per cent, particularly for people who may have experienced trauma or people with disability, it is helping them maintain their tenancy with just getting over a small hiccup, so thank you for your work you do on that. Support through the issuing of bonds you just touched on; hopefully the portable bond scheme will also help in this regard, to make it more likely people will not fall through the gaps between tenancies.

The CHAIR: Thank you Ms Kathage. The committee is going to take a very short break before resuming this hearing at 3:15 pm.

The committee will now resume its consideration of the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing. Mr Welch.

Richard WELCH: I am just going to quickly go back to the retail renting and the taking of retail rental properties by the department. Given your contention is that you were not competing with the market and you were not doing non-market terms, could you provide from any time after 15 August 2024 the number of rental properties rented by the department in those suburbs that I mentioned? There are 19 of them.

Peta McCAMMON: Sure, we could provide that.

Richard WELCH: The terms on which they were rented.

Peta McCAMMON: Yes. We are happy to take it on notice, and if there is a reason why we cannot – but happy to take it on notice, if you provide –

Richard WELCH: It is not commercial in confidence.

Peta McCAMMON: It is just more sometimes extracting detailed information. But I am happy to take that on notice.

Richard WELCH: Okay. Thank you very much.

Simon NEWPORT: Can I also point out there –

Richard WELCH: That is fine. I will just move on.

Simon NEWPORT: that we are unable to do leases outside of valuer-general terms.

Richard WELCH: No, thank you. It is my time. You had your statement at the beginning of the presentation.

Simon NEWPORT: Sure, okay. Thanks.

Richard WELCH: I would like to go back to some things that Roma had started with before she left. That was on the red door referrals. I think she was asking about how many L17s had been –

Peta McCAMMON: Orange Door.

Richard WELCH: Ms Britnell, sorry. I think she had asked how many L17s had been issued by the police.

Peta McCAMMON: We will have data on how many L17s have come into the Orange Doors for 2024–25. I think it is over 100,000.

Melanie HEENAN: Thank you. I do not think Ms Britnell got to ask me that question. She was talking about personal safety alarms. In relation to L17s for 2024–25, there were 95,381 over the course of the year, and that represents 51.8 per cent of referrals to the Orange Door.

Richard WELCH: Thank you. How many of those were presented as being high risk?

Melanie HEENAN: That is a question that I may have to see if I can take on notice. It will be that every one of those L17s would have gone through a risk assessment. Part of the screening, intake and triage process that the Orange Door undertakes is to do that very thing. To undertake a risk assessment at that point, it would be determined whether or not the risk is assessed as at very serious level, sometimes referred to as a tier 1, and the urgency through which that particular matter would need to move through to the assessment and planning teams in the Orange Door.

Richard WELCH: Thank you. Of those, how many were responded to within two to three days?

Melanie HEENAN: I will take that on notice for you.

Richard WELCH: Thank you. You might need to take this on notice – your choice. But can you provide a breakdown of the response times for all L17s, showing how many were responded to within one day, two to three days, four to seven days, eight to 14 days and greater than 14 days?

Melanie HEENAN: We should be able to do that for you, Mr Welch, as a point in time, because the manner in which the cases are moving will be throughputs and it will be very dependent on the type of matter or the matter that is being worked by the practitioners.

Richard WELCH: But would you maintain KPIs and performance measures around that?

Melanie HEENAN: We do certainly have the ability in our data to have a look at it, as I say, at a point in time. We are happy to look at it, but –

Richard WELCH: But it should not be a point-in-time assessment, should it? It should be annual figures of what you have achieved.

Melanie HEENAN: Yes, we absolutely do have performance measures in relation to how many people are coming into the Orange Door –

Richard WELCH: And how quickly you –

Melanie HEENAN: And how quickly – exactly – we are able to meet that KPI, which is in relation to seven days to be undertaking a risk assessment. I should say undertaking that risk assessment is often a comprehensive risk assessment that does take a considerable amount of time.

Richard WELCH: Yes. It is the response times we are after, just a mapping of that.

Melanie HEENAN: Yes, I am certainly happy to come back to you with that on notice, in terms of what we can provide. It might be helpful, though, to know that just in terms of the number of assessments that were undertaken –

Richard WELCH: Actually, I will just move on. We might get to what you are about to give me, hopefully. What was the longest time for a response to an L17?

Melanie HEENAN: I do not have that available for you today.

Richard WELCH: Can you provide that on notice?

Melanie HEENAN: Yes, I can.

Richard WELCH: Could you provide a breakdown of L17 referrals to the Orange Door, including the breakdown of all key sites, timeframe of response and to output access point of level, if available?

Melanie HEENAN: I might have to ask you to clarify that last part. I can certainly do a breakdown. I have a breakdown here in fact of L17s by primary site. That is the most significant site. There are access points and outposts in most areas now that are attached to or are part of a primary site's work, if you are interested in a particular region. But I have certainly got the breakdown of L17s by those primary sites.

Richard WELCH: I think we just want the broad breakdown, thank you. A question on the family violence service delivery: what proportion of the family violence budget was spent on prevention activities compared to family violence responses?

Peta McCAMMON: I know we have this for the 2024–25 year. I will just give Ms Heenan a minute to find it, but we do have that for you today.

Melanie HEENAN: We do, and I do have the proportion, Mr Welch – just give me one second – for the 2024–25 year. It is the proportion of funding spent on primary prevention. I guess that was the only other qualification I was going to make. It was 3.4 per cent of the portfolio output. I am labouring a little on primary prevention because it is a very particular form of prevention.

Richard WELCH: So are we missing or losing a bit of granularity in those figures? Is that a highly aggregated figure?

Melanie HEENAN: I could certainly talk with you about some of the initiatives that are funded by the primary prevention output.

Richard WELCH: No, just looking at the broad ratio of prevention to service delivery.

Melanie HEENAN: Yes.

Richard WELCH: 3 per cent is to prevention?

Melanie HEENAN: 3.4 per cent.

Richard WELCH: And the balance is to service?

Melanie HEENAN: Service delivery, indeed. But again I would say that there is a lot of prevention work that is undertaken in the delivery output, and that –

Richard WELCH: So it is sort of buried in the aggregate?

Melanie HEENAN: I am not meaning to be confusing about this, but it is just that a lot of the work that is done in preventing revictimisation, recidivism or further harm et cetera is absolutely part of the service delivery output. But what the primary prevention output is attempting to do is to get at the underlying causes of violence, so it is a very particular form of prevention.

Richard WELCH: Thank you. The number of family violence victim-survivors who received a refuge response decreased by 16.2 per cent. It is on, if you want to look it up, page 61. In raw numbers, how many people missed out?

Melanie HEENAN: I can absolutely come to that for you. There are two key factors that contributed to underperformance –

Richard WELCH: Just the numbers if you would, please.

Melanie HEENAN: I guess it is important for me to –

Peta McCAMMON: Just to clarify the question, I think Mr Welch's question was: how many family violence victims missed out on refuge?

Melanie HEENAN: Yes, and the answer to that is that there would be unlikely to have been any person that was seeking a response that did not get one.

Richard WELCH: Zero?

Melanie HEENAN: I would suggest that if a person or a family was seeking refuge and because of the reasons that led to the underperformance which were data related and maintenance related, there are alternatives that services will use when they have got maintenance or planned upgrade works that are happening. It is not that that family would not be offered a crisis accommodation response.

Richard WELCH: If this is the same answer, you can just tell me it is the same answer and I will not waste any time with it, because I have got a series in the same vein. How many families with children were amongst those who missed out?

Melanie HEENAN: It is a qualified answer again, I am sorry, Mr Welch. It is because what would have occurred in relation to the – and my colleague Mr Newport might like to speak to this further – families that would have otherwise gone into the refuges that were having planned upgrades meant that their BP3 measures – their performance – were not counted, because they can only be counted through that mechanism, but they would have been offered other properties or motels or other accommodation.

Richard WELCH: Thank you. What was the average wait time to get refuge accommodation?

Melanie HEENAN: The average wait time I will check on. I do not have that figure before me; I may be able to get it. In terms of the manner in which a refuge placement will work, it would always be that the family is offered something in between times. So for example –

Richard WELCH: But you would have your own performance measurements on that – your own stats – so if you could provide on notice the actual stats of it, you can qualify that when you provide it.

Melanie HEENAN: Okay.

Richard WELCH: How many women were accommodated in motels or hotels, in absolute terms?

Melanie HEENAN: On any given night? I can tell you that –

Richard WELCH: No, there must be an aggregate.

Melanie HEENAN: I am not sure that I have the full aggregate for the year, and again I will let you know why that is. There is –

Richard WELCH: If you do not have the aggregate, then if you could provide it on notice.

Melanie HEENAN: I will not be able to provide it on notice, and I can tell you why. The data point that we are seeking to be able to develop in a system called Ship has been added to that database, and we will be able to give you that figure, because it will have the very specific form of accommodation that was used, i.e., motel accommodation. What we have got at the moment are proxies, and that is by virtue of the fact that crisis brokerage, for example, is often used to support accommodation such as a motel, so there is not clear, clean data on the number of motels that are relied on in any one year at this point. There will be.

Richard WELCH: That is under your existing systems?

Melanie HEENAN: Under our existing systems.

Richard WELCH: When does the new system come in?

Melanie HEENAN: We have got the data point in over the last couple of months, so certainly this time next year, I will have that point for you.

Richard WELCH: But the new system is in and you have now got data in that? Are you backing historical data into it?

Melanie HEENAN: No, we cannot do that. But providers that are providing crisis accommodation now and refuge accommodation will be able to use that new data field.

Richard WELCH: Does that mean you do not have an average timeframe for someone fleeing family violence staying in a motel? You would not have that?

Melanie HEENAN: The average period of time someone is staying in a motel?

Richard WELCH: Yes.

Melanie HEENAN: No. But I can tell you it is –

Richard WELCH: These are pretty fundamental stats, I would have thought.

Melanie HEENAN: Well, there are different types of reasons that people may not be waiting for a refuge response.

Richard WELCH: No, I just mean in the sense of statistically that you were not tracking this already. That is surprising.

Melanie HEENAN: We only had proxies, as I say, to be able to track motel use.

Richard WELCH: Why is that? How many years has that been the case?

Melanie HEENAN: Oh, gosh, I could not tell you that particular –

Richard WELCH: Because if you do not have that, how can you allocate resources intelligently?

Melanie HEENAN: Because we do know, through the use of crisis brokerage, the extent to which crisis accommodation is utilised under that crisis brokerage, and that is often used through the Orange Door.

Richard WELCH: It is not the same thing, really.

Melanie HEENAN: It is not as precise as you are asking of me, that is true, but it is a fairly reliable proxy on the use of crisis accommodation. But as I say, Mr Welch, people may not be going into motels in waiting for a refuge. In fact they might go in for a very short period of time for respite. It could be that they are having personal security checks done at their house. It could be that they are having cameras put in at their house and they only want to be in the motel for a reasonably short period of time.

Richard WELCH: Right. The maintenance and upgrades that are taking place – are they increasing capacity or are they just modernising the existing capacity?

Simon NEWPORT: They were mostly related to fire and safety and security.

Richard WELCH: So they are not adding to capacity?

Simon NEWPORT: No. Just bringing it up to code.

Richard WELCH: Okay.

Melanie HEENAN: I can say, Mr Welch, that the refuge redevelopment program though, that you were asking about before, is increasing capacity. So every time one of those refuges is redeveloped – they will be redeveloped according to the core and cluster – they are increasing capacity.

Richard WELCH: Is that different to Mr Newport's answer?

Simon NEWPORT: There is another six refuges on their way, on top of the maintenance work we are talking about.

Richard WELCH: On their way – when will they come online?

Simon NEWPORT: I have not got a list of the dates of each one, but they are all in construction now. We can go through each one if you like, but –

Richard WELCH: If it is just –

Simon NEWPORT: Bairnsdale is handing over next week. I can go through all of them. There are a couple that are forecast to happen in the next 18 months.

Richard WELCH: What capacity would they represent?

Simon NEWPORT: I do not have the unit numbers; Mel might have that.

Melanie HEENAN: I can find the precise figure for you, but it is going to 190-something households when the full refuge redevelopment program is done.

Richard WELCH: By when?

Melanie HEENAN: Mr Newport is correct; it will be in the next 18 months. So 2027–28 – all of the 22 refuges, some of which are redevelopments and some of which are new builds.

Simon NEWPORT: One is handing over next week, as an example, so they happen progressively.

Melanie HEENAN: Sorry, 170 right now – placements in refuge – and it will go up to 199.

Richard WELCH: Okay. Thank you. Just to come back on to the question, though, I do want to clarify: do you or do you not know how many people are staying in a motel each night?

Melanie HEENAN: Yes, I do have that on any given night. But I had thought you had said that you wanted a collective figure. I am just trying to find that now. On any given night up to 123 households were accommodated in crisis accommodation, and that would generally be a motel.

Richard WELCH: That is all right. If it is going to take a little while –

Peta McCAMMON: Oh no, you must have missed it.

Richard WELCH: Oh, did I miss it?

Peta McCAMMON: Yes.

Melanie HEENAN: Sorry, on any given night the number is 123 households.

Richard WELCH: Thank you. Sorry, that is very unlike me; I usually do not waste any time at all. I would like to ask a couple of questions around disability carers. Under the disability action plan 2022–26, that action plan has 186 actions. In last year's PAEC questions it was reported that 28 of these actions had been completed, 139 were in progress and eight had not commenced. Can you provide an update on these 186 actions, please?

Peta McCAMMON: Yes, we can.

Richard WELCH: You can take that on notice if it is –

Peta McCAMMON: Well, we actually report publicly on our progress, and we did have a midway report. But we have brought today – and I know Rachael is just flipping through her pages – some updates that we can provide the committee.

Richard WELCH: I guess for the sake of time, how many are completed, as the first metric, and how many have not commenced?

Peta McCAMMON: Do you want to go?

Rachael GREEN: Of the royal commission update report yesterday –

Peta McCAMMON: No, this is the state disability plan.

Rachael GREEN: You are asking about state disability plan updates?

Richard WELCH: Yes. State disability action plan.

Peta McCAMMON: Yes. So of the 175 original actions, 28 are complete, 139 are on track to be completed by June 2026, eight are still to be progressed – and there are 11 new and still to be progressed. And I would say that is a whole-of-government plan, so all those actions are across multiple ministers and departments.

Richard WELCH: Okay. Thank you. A veterans question hopefully – how much time have I got, Chair?

The CHAIR: Two and a half minutes.

Richard WELCH: Two and a half minutes, okay. Two and a half minutes, gang. Let us make it count.

Peta McCAMMON: Okay.

Richard WELCH: On the uptake of the veterans card, which is a digital card, we heard last time that the uptake had been less than 20 per cent of more than 100,000 veterans. What is the uptake figure now?

Rachael GREEN: I can –

Peta McCAMMON: Have you got it? Yes. Good one.

Rachael GREEN: Sorry about the previous one. We are at 20 per cent now, so we are at 20,548 veterans –

Richard WELCH: No improvement on the uptake?

Rachael GREEN: No. We are working hard in relation to promoting the veterans card pretty broadly through the range of peak bodies, ex-service organisations, but –

Richard WELCH: You would be pretty aware that veterans would prefer a physical card. Have you considered that?

Rachael GREEN: Yes, we are aware of that. For those that do not have a smartphone we are looking at a range of options so they can log on to Service Vic. They can get a physical number, so it does not stop them without having a card. Once they are on public transport, they can show the card. They can wear their –

Richard WELCH: Thank you. I am going to get one last one in. It is important. The RSL is currently paying substantially for commemorations at the shrine. Do you think that is appropriate? Do you think, given the service, that the state should be meeting these costs, not the veterans?

Rachael GREEN: This is about Anzac Day?

Richard WELCH: Yes, and in fact any time they use the shrine I think they have to pay. They had a \$340,000 bill to use the Shrine of Remembrance for commemoration services.

Rachael GREEN: We have given them \$85,000 this year, so the state does contribute.

Richard WELCH: Yes, but it is \$340,000. Do you think it is appropriate that they should be paying?

Peta McCAMMON: I do not think it is necessarily fair for Ms Green to answer a question around the fairness of –

The CHAIR: Exactly right, Secretary.

Peta McCAMMON: I think that puts her in a –

The CHAIR: Mr Welch, Ms Green cannot give her personal opinion about something. If you want to rephrase that?

Richard WELCH: Okay. So there will be no further state co-contribution?

Rachael GREEN: Those conversations are ongoing in relation to contributions.

Richard WELCH: So there is dialogue within the department. Can we say it is under consideration?

Rachael GREEN: I cannot say that.

Richard WELCH: What can we say?

Mathew HILAKARI: Get him over the line. You have got 8 seconds left.

Richard WELCH: Thank you very much.

The CHAIR: You had 2 seconds to go, Richard. Okay. We are going to go to Mr Tak.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you, Chair, Secretary and officials. I have a few questions on food relief supports. They relate to budget paper 3, pages 38 and 40, Secretary. We are all acutely aware at the moment that the increasing cost of living provides a real challenge for many of the individuals and families in my electorate and across the state. This is making it particularly difficult for people to access food that they need to feed themselves and also their families. Secretary, could you please describe to the committee how the commitment outlined in the budget – I referred to the pages – contributes to greater access to fresh food and ultimately strengthens food security across the state? Thank you.

Rachael GREEN: Thank you for the question and a great opportunity to talk about this really important work. It really builds on, I think, the 2024 parliamentary inquiry into food relief and the government response. In 2023, as you say, 8000 Victorian adults ran out of food and could not afford to buy more, so it is pretty severe. So the 2024–25 budget invested \$6 million to strengthen food security across Victoria, bringing the total investment in food relief since 2020 to \$56 million as at 30 June 2025. This investment included \$1.5 million to continue operational funding support for regional food shares in Albury–Wodonga, Shepparton, Mildura, Bendigo, Warrnambool and Geelong and shared services throughout the regional food security alliance.

In 2024–25, just in terms of numbers, the state's six regional food shares that I have just outlined collectively distributed over 3.1 million kilograms of food, which equates to nearly 6.2 million meals for Victorians. Also in

the 2024–25 state budget there was \$4.5 million invested towards the inaugural round of the community relief program, which as you indicate was further supported by the 2025–26 budget, and this funded four coordination grants for large-scale food relief providers and 112 local grants, including neighbourhood houses, really importantly. Together this coordination and the local grant funding streams are supporting a stronger food security system at a statewide and local level.

As an example, through the 2024–25 coordination grants OzHarvest received \$200,000 to establish a new warehouse and distribution centre in south-east Melbourne, which has increased food delivery efficiency and supported an additional 12 organisations to provide food relief. In terms of, as you said, the 2025–26 budget, this has continued, with \$18 million invested in food relief through the recent budget, which will further strengthen the state's food relief sector.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you, and it is good to know that the grants program continued from 2025 to 2026. Can you please outline what support is available to the smaller charities and food relief organisations through this program and what impact you expect that will have on our community?

Rachael GREEN: Starting with the 2024–25 year, \$4.5 million went to the smaller food charities, which was the first round, the inaugural round, of the community food relief program for coordination grants – 112 local grants which impacted on 58 local government areas in terms of the last financial year. A good example was Sunraysia Mallee Ethnic Communities Council receiving a grant of \$32,000 to expand culturally appropriate food relief services across Mildura and Swan Hill. In detail, food vouchers were distributed to over 200 individuals in Swan Hill. Thinking about how that has been built on through the recent budget, it has doubled this funding for the second round in relation to focus on, as you were saying, the smaller providers. This \$9 million additional investment includes another local grant stream – \$15,000 to \$100,000 in relation to grants to smaller organisations. As you will know, the minister announced a range of food relief grants for this financial year yesterday in fact, and 126 further projects have been funded.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you. Are you able to talk more still on the community food relief grant program and the statewide large-scale food relief organisations that will be supported through these grants, like SecondBite, FareShare and OzHarvest, that play a critical role in distributing and freighting food across regional and metro Victoria. How does this program support the important work delivering vital food relief services across the state?

Rachael GREEN: I think the difference with these is they are across the state. They are really setting up a statewide infrastructure in supporting food relief. In fact in 2024–25 four of those coordination grants were awarded supporting those partnerships you referenced, those large scale projects. These are \$250,000 projects – things like buying a 10-pallet truck, boosting that delivery capacity to regional Victoria. In 2025–26 that has continued to expand – that investment. Some of the funded projects it is continuing to build on are things like Alex Makes Meals, which will receive \$270,000 and make over 70,000 culturally appropriate meals across Melbourne's north-east. Geelong Foodshare Inc is another of that vein, supporting major food relief charities larger scale and having quite a broad reach.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you. I refer to the same paper, budget paper 3, on page 40. It refers to additional support for food relief through neighbourhood houses. In my electorate I from time to time see firsthand how neighbourhood houses contribute to helping those families that are in need, and also across the state. Can you please outline how the government is supporting organisations such as the neighbourhood houses to continue to deliver this important service and provide more food relief to people that need it most?

Rachael GREEN: Yes, of course. It is a really important network of providers. There is a \$45.9 million investment in the neighbourhood house program this year. As you say, it is just such an important avenue for community to get support. From the data that we have for 2024–25, we estimate that around 275 neighbourhood houses are providing food relief, including groceries, meals and vouchers – that is nearly 2.9 tonnes of food reported in 2024. In more detail there was \$2.5 million allocated in the state budget in the 2024–25 year to 73 neighbourhood houses. Building on that, in the recent announcement, in the 2025–26 budget this is covering 52 neighbourhood houses, so a significant portion of the neighbourhood house program is delivering food relief programs.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you for your response. I would also like to take this opportunity to say thank you to a neighbourhood house in my electorate, the Make a Difference Dingley Village organisation, that has been working so hard and that also relies for much of its services on volunteers.

Moving on to the seniors card, Secretary, the program continues to be very, very successful, with 92 per cent of eligible seniors participating in the program in the year 2024–25. We know that cost-of-living pressures also impact on older Victorians. How is this program helping older Victorians stay connected and active in their community while also easing everyday costs?

Rachael GREEN: Did you say the companion card? I am so sorry; I missed that.

Meng Heang TAK: Seniors card.

Mathew HILAKARI: Tell us about the companion card. I have not heard about this.

Rachael GREEN: The companion card is great. There are actually three cards.

Mathew HILAKARI: Okay.

Rachael GREEN: Since 1991 – the seniors card. Of course people aged 60 and over and working less than 35 hours a week can receive the Victorian Seniors Card, accessing business discounts; free and concessionary public transport; eight days of free public transport during the seniors festival, which is such a significant month on the calendar every year; and free fishing in Victorian waters as well. There is a physical or a digital card. In relation to the digital question raised before, it does feel like there are more and more people taking up the digital option in relation to the access of the cards. I think it is about 50 or 60 per cent in relation to that, so it is increasing. I am just trying to find you the numbers. I think we have about 1300, but I am just looking for it in terms of increasing every week. We are looking at quite a significant uptake. I guess the other thing to mention is in relation to First Nations recognition is that First Nations people can access the card from 50, and I think Victoria was the first state to do that.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you. Many of our seniors also come from the multicultural community. Can you provide examples of key partnerships during 2024–25 that benefit cardholders? How does the department ensure that the senior card continues to reach culturally and linguistically diverse as well as rural and regional communities?

Rachael GREEN: A really important part is the work of the seniors festival, in terms of what that does in relation to the reach across that month every year. My apologies; I am trying to find a bit more detail.

Meng Heang TAK: If it helps, it is budget 2024–25, budget paper 3, page 120.

Rachael GREEN: I might look to my exec director in the corridor. I do apologise; I just do not have the detail in front of me.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you.

Rachael GREEN: Thank you, Mr Tak, for your patience. Michele.

Michele CLARK: Hello. You are interested in the businesses for the seniors card.

Meng Heang TAK: Yes.

Michele CLARK: There are currently 1837 individual businesses, across 3062 locations, offering discounts to seniors cardholders. They are searchable on the seniors online website, and they are all across the state. It is voluntary, and we work in partnership with those businesses to provide those benefits to a whole range of Victorians who have the seniors card.

Peta McCAMMON: I think you had a question too around the reach – multicultural, rural and regional. Just picking up from Ms Green around the seniors festival, I think it started as a week, now it is a month, in terms of the reach.

Mathew HILAKARI: It is a lot of festival.

Peta McCAMMON: Yes, it is a long festival.

Mathew HILAKARI: It is enormous.

Peta McCAMMON: But the local councils, who often have the best connection with local communities in terms of multicultural, regional and rural communities, deliver or support 2892 events as part of that seniors festival. Some of the council-delivered events were for priority groups, including First Nations seniors, culturally and linguistically diverse seniors, seniors living with disability, LGBTIQA+ seniors, veterans and also older vulnerable men. There are obviously opportunities for us to get a different reach in terms of the diversity of the seniors population, and one of those offerings is the seniors card.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you. On the same page in budget paper 3, page 120, the Victorian Senior of the Year Awards are an important part of the seniors festival. How does recognising older Victorians through this award help strengthen our community, especially participation? Can you tell us more about that?

Michele CLARK: Yes, I am very happy to talk about our wonderful Senior of the Year Awards. It is one of the highlights of our year in the seniors portfolio. In October 2024 the Senior of the Year Awards recognised 15 deserving senior Victorians for their volunteering efforts since turning 60. The event was hosted by Lieutenant-Governor Professor James Angus on behalf of Her Excellency Professor the Honourable Margaret Gardner AC, Governor of Victoria, at our beautiful Government House, with the Premier of Victoria and Minister for Ageing in attendance. The prestigious Premier's Award for Victorian Senior of the Year went to Professor Manjula Datta O'Connor for her tireless work in raising awareness about dowry abuse and family violence in Victoria – obviously an issue close to this department's heart.

Finally, I would like to take the opportunity to congratulate the 17 seniors who were recognised for their invaluable contributions at the 2025 Victorian Senior of the Year Awards, which was held at Government House on 22 October 2025. Integral to this portfolio is recognising that as we age we bring so much to the community, and that is in our seniors festival and through our Senior of the Year Awards. It is wonderful to be able to recognise all of those efforts.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you so much.

Mathew HILAKARI: Who is on the committee who decides the Senior of the Year?

Michele CLARK: It is an independent appointed committee. It is people with a range of experiences and from all different parts of our community who look at all the different nominations. It is an incredibly humbling experience to read all the nominations and see the breadth of –

Mathew HILAKARI: Do you get a lot of nominations each year?

Michele CLARK: We do – we get a lot of nominations. I do not have the exact figure here, but it has a breadth and recognition which we are really pleased with.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you very much, and good to know. Please pass on our congratulations to the seniors award. Secretary, I would like to take you back to the veterans support program on page 28 of the questionnaire. We can see that there is an extension of the public sector veteran employment strategy. What sort of success has this program had in terms of helping veterans who are transitioning from the ADF into the civilian workforce?

Peta McCAMMON: I am happy to make a start – and then Ms Green – because we were actually talking about this program this morning, because it has been such a successful program in terms of the performance against targets. I guess the establishment of this program actually recognises the skills and experience that veterans can bring in relation to the contribution that they can make within the civilian workforce but also that they may have some barriers in terms of transitioning, so it is a dedicated program. I will hand over to Ms Green to talk a little bit more, because as I said, it has been a really highly successful program for the individuals involved.

Rachael GREEN: Yes. Thanks, Secretary. In terms of the numbers, it is one of those ones that has just escalated in terms of its success. It has increased, and by the end of 2024–25 we have had 1860 veterans who have been employed in the Victorian public sector. They have moved into areas around Victoria Police, corrections, Emergency Management Victoria and a range of jobs across the public sector. There are a number

in the department who are providing fantastic advice and bringing skills and a contribution that are really valued. The cost of employing those veterans within the departments is met by the department. So for the program itself, the recent budget allocated another \$800,000 over two years to support the continuation of the strategy. It is really about how to support those veterans in relation to thinking about their skills, in relation to providing mentoring support and really, as the Secretary said, in terms of building confidence about getting back into different arenas and different work that they can contribute to significantly.

It also is really important in terms of the royal commission recommendations around veterans and suicide, the very strong recommendations about that importance of hooking back into and giving people pathways back into employment. As reported by the royal commission, veterans who struggle to gain employment after they transition experience poorer outcomes, including financial stress and lower income, obviously and an increased likelihood of experiencing homelessness, poorer self-perceived satisfaction and quality of life. We know strongly the benefits of employment. We also know that transition back into civilian life can be a hard time for families, for children and for partners, in terms of what that means. It is also about how employment provides access to the service system and how that person and that veteran can then get broader support.

The department would really like to call out the work of the veterans employment advocate, Major General David McLachlan, and the department's office for veterans, who really work hard. It is a small function, but they just look across government more broadly at what significant opportunities for veterans there are. Key activities delivered under the strategy include those employment workshops, the employment network and, as I said before, the mentorship program. Over 140 veterans registered for in-person workshops in 2024–25 to hear about employment opportunities in the public sector and to meet with hiring managers and, really importantly, those mentors.

The CHAIR: Apologies, Mr Tak. We are going to go to M Puglielli.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon. I will start us off on the public housing at 12 Holland Court, Flemington. At 12 Holland Court, can I ask: what was the total spend for maintenance in 2024–25?

Simon NEWPORT: I do not have the maintenance spend by individual locations.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: With you today – are you able to provide it on notice?

Simon NEWPORT: I am sure we will be able to provide you with something. I am not sure we will be able to provide you with every single detail, but we will do our best, yes.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. My understanding is that, at 12 Holland Court in Flemington, Homes Victoria has installed security cameras on each floor and around the building perimeter and has put up electronic steel barricades and gates on every floor. Can I ask how much money specifically was spent on installing those cameras and gates?

Simon NEWPORT: I will have to get you that information. We are obviously taking every effort to keep the handful of people in that building safe from both protesters and potential squatters. We are doing everything we can to protect those few people that are left.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. Thank you. I will ask then, still on that topic, about the Richmond walk-ups. Can I ask how much money was spent on new cameras for those walk-ups?

Simon NEWPORT: Again, I do not have that information on hand.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: But on notice is possible?

Simon NEWPORT: Yes, we can take that on notice.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. Moving on, in terms of the Holland Court and Victoria Street, Flemington, developments under ground lease model project 1 led by Building Communities consortium, how much were their quarterly service payments for this financial year that we are examining?

Simon NEWPORT: I do not have the quarterly service payments by program here now. We will have to provide that information.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: On notice? That would be great.

Simon NEWPORT: Yes.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. Can I ask also for the annual service payments?

Simon NEWPORT: Yes. We will provide the annual cost.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. Have Building Communities met all their contractual requirements so far?

Simon NEWPORT: To my knowledge, yes. I would like to just confirm that. I have not been made aware of any breaches of the contract, so I will say yes, but allow me to double-check if that is okay.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: You are welcome to come back to us. Is the department aware of any notices of potential breaches, remedies sought or abatement matters that have been raised with Building Communities regarding Holland Court and Victoria Street, Flemington?

Simon NEWPORT: To my knowledge no abatement matters have been brought up with Building Communities, no.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. Is that something you also want to check?

Simon NEWPORT: I said to my knowledge, yes. When you start getting into contract administration of specific sites, I would just make sure I check with the team, but normally those things would be escalated to me. So, yes, I will. I would say no, but allow me to just confirm.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. Thank you. Can I ask: has Building Communities consortium been awarded the tender for 33 Alfred Street, North Melbourne?

Simon NEWPORT: No.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. Do we know who has at this stage?

Simon NEWPORT: It is in procurement, but the reason why I can answer the question is that they are not participating in that round.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. Thank you. Just looking at the Richmond walk-ups again, for those walk-ups on Anderson Court, Williams Court and Elizabeth Street, Richmond, can I ask how much was spent on maintenance and repairs for those walk-ups for this budget period?

Simon NEWPORT: Again, I am sorry, I do not have individual address maintenance information here, but we can see what we can do about digging up that information for you.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Alongside the others that I mentioned. Thank you. If you are digging those up, if you have got them for the previous three financial years, that would be of benefit also – only if you have got them.

Simon NEWPORT: We will do our best.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. Can I ask, for the Richmond walk-ups still: were any land valuations done on that estate land around the walk-ups for 2024–25?

Simon NEWPORT: To my knowledge, no, but again, I am not across every single detail of what a team member might do. To my knowledge, no, but again, I can just take that on notice to see whether there are any valuations. But I do not believe so.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: It would be good to know also if there had been valuations for that land prior to the budget period we are examining.

Simon NEWPORT: Yes.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. I will move on to another matter. Regarding the playgrounds at Collingwood public housing estate at 240 Wellington Street and Harmsworth Street Reserve, were either of the playgrounds inspected or upgraded by Homes Victoria in the budget period?

Simon NEWPORT: Are you talking about the Thriving North Richmond work and program, or are you talking about the ones next door to the walk-ups?

Aiv PUGLIELLI: The addresses that I listed: 240 Wellington Street and Harmsworth Street Reserve. I am not sure if that is captured in what you are describing.

Simon NEWPORT: It is probably Thriving North Richmond, and that project is just about coming to an end. We have just been doing a little bit of work with the school. Again, I will have to confirm with the asset management team the extent of the works, but to my knowledge we are getting very near to the end of that.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: It was specifically whether those playgrounds had been inspected or upgraded, so if you can come back to me.

Simon NEWPORT: Well, again, obviously I am not going to be across that level of detail on that individual site.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: That is all right. I am just keen to get a sense if there has been identification of maintenance works needed at either of those playgrounds, but you are welcome to come back to me.

Simon NEWPORT: Sure.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: The Atherton estate playground in Fitzroy – can I ask about that one? Was that playground inspected or upgraded by Homes Vic in 2024–25?

Simon NEWPORT: I would have to take that on notice in terms of an individual works on a playground.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. If it was not, it would be good to know whether that is going to be a priority site designated for the future – that is if it was not.

Simon NEWPORT: I can give you an answer to some of these now. I have got my asset executive director telling me.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: If you have got them to hand, otherwise I have got a lot of questions. You are welcome to come back on notice.

Simon NEWPORT: They have inspected these. The address you are talking about was in Collingwood. They have conducted inspections. Yes, they have conducted inspections.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: For all the playgrounds I mentioned?

Simon NEWPORT: I believe so, yes. If I am wrong, I will be soon corrected, so I will say yes.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: And none were upgraded, just inspected?

Simon NEWPORT: To my knowledge, no.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. Thank you. I might move on to another matter. Regarding public housing on Solly Avenue, Princes Hill, in October 2024 the Parliament was informed at the time by the minister that there were seven vacant properties at Solly Avenue estate. Can I ask for the period we are examining – we will say at 30 June – how many properties were vacant?

Simon NEWPORT: In total or just at that individual address?

Aiv PUGLIELLI: In that individual estate.

Simon NEWPORT: I have got it by LGA, I have got it by a number of categories, but I do not have individual addresses, so we can take that on notice.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: That is okay. If you can come back to me, that is all good. And it would be good to know how long those properties have been vacant once you have got that number.

Simon NEWPORT: Okay. We will have that information, yes.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. Earlier this year Solly Avenue estate residents were notified of soil testing works at the estate. Do we know why that was?

Simon NEWPORT: No. I am sorry, I am not armed with that information at present.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. You can come back on notice.

Simon NEWPORT: Yes.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: That would be great. I will move on now to relocations. Can I ask: what was the total projected cost specifically for relocations of public housing residents in 2024–25?

Simon NEWPORT: I do have some information on the budget for relocations. Let me just dig it up. I have got the relocations team, because we have 31 dedicated staff, and it costs us \$4.2 million a year to operate that team. In terms of the relocations, I do not have a breakdown for the year. I only have a breakdown of the approved funding and what has been spent so far. And that, of course, would include the staff costs.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Is that spent in 2024–25 or beyond?

Simon NEWPORT: It would be since the program, so it would be two years. If you want specifically last year, I will have to get back to you on notice.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Yes, that would be welcomed if you can.

Simon NEWPORT: But I can tell you that what has been committed so far is \$7.8 million.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: The question was around projected cost. It would be good to know: did those projections match the actual spend for relocation?

Simon NEWPORT: Look, I do know that we are on budget with our relocations. We have not exceeded that relocations budget. The total so far, in terms of approved, without being too precise, is \$16.848 million.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay, thank you. With regard to purchasing homes for relocation purposes, what was the total projected cost for that for 2024–25?

Simon NEWPORT: I do not have the individual breakdown for the year. We have it for across all of the sites. I would point out that this is allocated towards tranches 1 and 2, so that is five towers in total. It is \$122.258 million. According to these records we spent \$118 million, so we are under.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: And are you able to come back to us for 2024–25 specifically, just for the budget period?

Simon NEWPORT: Yes, we can do that.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you.

Simon NEWPORT: I would assume the majority of that will have been spent in the period that we are talking about, but we can confirm that.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Similar to the previous question I asked, it would be good to compare the projection of costs for purchasing homes for relocation – did that match the actual?

Simon NEWPORT: Yes, okay. Unless I am corrected, I believe we are under budget or within budget for both, but again, we will confirm.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. We touched on head leasing earlier, but just the one question I have there is: how much was spent on head leasing homes for relocations in 2024–25?

Simon NEWPORT: Again, same response: I have only got it for a program so far. In terms of what has been committed – and bearing in mind ‘committed’ covers the entire terms of the lease, which goes for five years, and we will not talk about that again – it is \$16.5 million. But there has only been \$151,000 expensed so far on leasing, so you can see it is very early days.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Yes, okay.

Simon NEWPORT: We have pointed out that the leased properties will be considerably under budget. We have not leased anywhere near the amount of properties we thought we may have needed to.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Right, okay. Not to be too repetitive, but if there is a 2024–25 number, if you could come back to us, that would be great.

Simon NEWPORT: We will.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. Can you confirm for us, in terms of relocation officers, were any offered bonuses in 2024–25?

Simon NEWPORT: The staff?

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Yes.

Simon NEWPORT: Absolutely not.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: No? Has that ever been a practice?

Simon NEWPORT: No.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Never?

Simon NEWPORT: No.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. On another matter, in terms of additional funding for the whole high-rise redevelopment program, there was a Treasurer’s advance funding of \$149.6 million. The reason given was to deliver on an approved state budget initiative. Can I ask: why was extra funding required? What was unforeseen about that program?

Simon NEWPORT: September last year, tranche 2 was announced.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay, and that was the unforeseen –

Simon NEWPORT: Well, when I say it was unforeseen, once it is outside of the budget cycle, it is then drawn not from the budget papers, and so it is an additional amount of money. It does not represent a blowout, it means we added two towers.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: I will move on, but still on public housing.

Simon NEWPORT: Sure.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Do you have the total number of public housing maintenance reports lodged by residential security guards for the budget period?

Simon NEWPORT: No. We can take that on notice. I am assuming you are going to ask me to take that on notice.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Yes. That would be great, thank you.

Simon NEWPORT: I am not sure if it is standard practice for us to get maintenance guards to be placing orders. I do not think it is, is it, Danny?

Danny O’KELLY: No.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Not from residential security guards.

Simon NEWPORT: No. I mean, they may well notify a housing officer, but I do not – in fact I am almost certain of that.

Danny O'KELLY: We can confirm whether they can even call the call centre directly themselves.

Simon NEWPORT: Yes.

Danny O'KELLY: But we can confirm that.

Simon NEWPORT: It is part of their contract that if they see something, they should say something, in very simple terms, but I do not believe they are the ones actioning. In fact they are not. They are not actioning maintenance items at all. They will just go and tell a staff member that something needs to be addressed.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. In terms of what you do find that is recorded, if there is something you find, 2024–25 would be great.

Simon NEWPORT: Okay.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: And if you have got the two previous financial years, that would be good too.

Simon NEWPORT: Sure.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you very much. Moving on, for 2024–25, in terms of the total public housing stock, how much was vacant? Let us say as at 30 June.

Simon NEWPORT: Okay. I do have that. Just give me a second. In terms of properties that are in the re-tenancy process, 1231, and those that are held for asset management purposes – including, and I will break those up – that is another additional 1846. 952 of those are being held for redevelopment, whether that is Housing Australia Future Fund, Social Housing Accelerator Fund, Regional Housing Fund or towers. There are an additional 526 as part of that 1800 that are currently being brought back for upgrade, and there are 368 which are going into detailed scoping and structural assessment.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. Thank you for those figures. It would be good to know, as at 30 June, how many of those would the department have deemed unsuitable to re-let?

Simon NEWPORT: Well, based on those statistics at the moment, at least 526 are currently going through that process. I would point out that out of the 1231, given the excellent results for the year in terms of the turnaround times, I would expect all of those to come back. There might be 178 which are being assessed, so that is a fairly small number out of 1231. And out of that 368 which are going through detailed structural assessment, I would imagine some will pass and some will not.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay.

Simon NEWPORT: We would have no further information at that time. That will be the next year.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Yes, okay. Can I ask: of our public housing stock, how much of it is still occupied?

Simon NEWPORT: Well, everything. If I take the numbers and minus the vacancies, I can do the math for you, if you want to wait, or I can supply you the information.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: That is okay. You are welcome to supply that.

I will just move on to a total other matter, not on housing anymore. Looking at outputs under the department, page 120 of BP3, LGBTQIA+ equality policy and programs. Last year the department provided \$1.57 million for pride events across the state as part of a four-year, \$6.8 million investment for annual statewide events celebrating LGBTQIA+ communities, with that package finishing up this financial year that we are in now. On the Pride street party in Collingwood and Fitzroy specifically, can I confirm that the department intends to continue that event beyond what is currently funded?

Rachael GREEN: I do not have that with me. Can I come back to you on that?

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Yes, you definitely can. Yes, thank you.

Rachael GREEN: I would say highly likely, but I just do not have that here.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. Thank you. Thank you very much. Moving on. I have a question now on permanent care parent applications. Can I confirm, when people are applying to become permanent care parents that they have to undergo health checks as part of the application process. Is that correct?

Danny O'KELLY: Health checks? I am not sure what type of health check you are referencing. There is a range of things that need to be assessed.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Can you take us through that?

Danny O'KELLY: I can provide you with specifics of what we go through in assessing a permanent carer.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Yes, okay. That would be great to have, particularly like medical checks I am referring to.

Annette LANCY: Yes, let us take on notice. We will see if we can get back to you.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay, thank you. And where I am going with this, just to confirm, has there been a practice that people have been required to undergo HIV testing to become permanent care parents?

Danny O'KELLY: Certainly not that I am aware of, no.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay.

Annette LANCY: But we will take it on.

Danny O'KELLY: But we can confirm that. We will take it on notice.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you.

Simon NEWPORT: Sorry. I can quickly confirm that guards do call the housing contact centre. They do not raise the orders, but they ring someone who can. We will still get you that information, but if they see something, they can make a call to the housing call centre.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Yes. So I think to update that question, that would then be how many times that happened.

Simon NEWPORT: If we can track that, if we can track the source, we can do that for you, yes.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. I might just move on with the time I have got remaining; actually, I might come back to public housing. The tower at 351 Barkly Street, Brunswick, is scheduled for demolition by I believe 2051. When would we expect residents would be required to relocate from that tower?

Simon NEWPORT: What we have made very, very clear and we made clear in the announcement last year for tranche 2, and we would for any further announcements, is we try to give renters as much notice as possible. There is clearly a broad program that has been mapped out. However, that constantly changes. And whilst I cannot give you specific examples because there are matters under procurement, if and when alternative funding becomes available or asset condition changes or there are other opportunities, we might move it around a little bit. But we gave the commitment last September to say no-one would be actively relocated until 1 July next year, so we gave them whatever that is – what is that, 21 months. We would like to give people as much notice as possible, but we cannot give them many, many years notice. That has not been announced so far. So the short answer to my question is: we cannot tell you that, but we would like to give renters as much notice as we possibly can, and we will continue to do that.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. Thank you. I might move on. Looking to budget paper 3, page 36 of 'Service Delivery', under the budget line 'Disability Services', there is \$45.6 million allocated for a 2024–25 state

subsidy to fund group homes – a one-off allocation. Can I ask: does that include funding for group home providers Aruma, Life Without Barriers, Melba Support Services, Possibility and Scope? Is that correct?

Peta McCAMMON: We will have to confirm –

Rachael GREEN: I think I will take that on notice.

Peta McCAMMON: We will confirm the specifics of that for you.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. Thank you. This has been discussed quite publicly for some time. I understand that subsidy is coming to an end in December this year, with 580 group homes closing and 4900 participants facing what sounds like eviction. Can the department confirm that is the case?

Peta McCAMMON: Well, I think what we can confirm is that there was a decision of government in 2018, in line with the NDIS coming in, and the decision was where government had previously operated the support services for people within group homes, that the government would tender that out. So that was tendered out through a commercial, highly competitive process. Those providers that you mentioned, they were successful to pick up the SIL, so the supported accommodation component for people with a disability. And government made a decision for a short-term contractual arrangement to assist with the transition. It was always a short-term contractual arrangement, it was always transparent, and it was always transparent that that would end on 31 December. The expectation is that then those providers are operating, just like all other providers, within the NDIS. So issues around sustainability of the supports or issues around the sustainability of those providers is a matter for the Commonwealth.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay.

Peta McCAMMON: I do not think it is a fair characterisation for the end of that short-term contract to then be associated with closure of homes and evictions of participants.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. In that case, though, what will happen to these group homes?

Peta McCAMMON: So what will happen, and what we have been advocating to the Commonwealth for, is that if there are concerns around the support needs of those people with a disability, that they are addressed through the NDIA, so that they get the adequate supports that they need to support their independent living. We have been advocating on that point to the Commonwealth, and we will continue to do that.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay.

Rachael GREEN: Can I add in, I think –

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Pardon me. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Apologies. I am going to go to Mr Hilakari.

Mathew HILAKARI: Thank you, Secretary and officials, for attending this afternoon. We are almost there, so that is a fantastic thing, but not yet for you, Mr Newport. I am going to just follow up on some questions from the Greens political party a moment ago around protesters and squatters. Is it correct that you were saying protesters and squatters were on the Flemington site?

Simon NEWPORT: Yes.

Mathew HILAKARI: Is it a risk for people that their modern new homes might be delayed because of that activity?

Simon NEWPORT: There have probably already been some delays to the construction of the ground lease models which are currently being built on Racecourse Road. Yes, it is a risk, but to be fair, we are far more worried about the risk to the safety of workers and protesters.

Mathew HILAKARI: Okay. So those people who need a home are at risk of not getting that in a timely manner.

Simon NEWPORT: Yes.

Mathew HILAKARI: Can you talk to me about some of those safety risks and what you have been doing to try and minimise and mitigate those risks?

Simon NEWPORT: Of course we do make safe every single apartment as it is vacated. We effectively secure those to make sure that people cannot break in. We are constantly changing security codes and fobs, which unfortunately sometimes do get shared or become known to the public. As each floor is vacated, yes, we do board them up and we do activate each floor, and in certain circumstances, particularly at Flemington, we have roving security patrols now, so if someone does happen to get in we will know within moments that they have got in. If they trespass, we will call the police.

Mathew HILAKARI: That then costs I am not sure how much money. A lot of money that should be used for housing is getting diverted away from housing that people actually need.

Simon NEWPORT: I do not have the dollar figure here. But yes, unfortunately every dollar that we spend on that is a dollar we cannot spend on either fixing someone's home or building a new home.

Mathew HILAKARI: What would your message be to those people who are squatting or asking people to squat and protest at those sites?

Simon NEWPORT: I absolutely respect their democratic right to protest and use their legal rights. I would also ask them to think about the privacy and safety of the renters that are left and certainly, hopefully, not impact the construction of brand new dwellings for people who desperately need them.

Mathew HILAKARI: Thank you. I might move on to Pound Road in Colac. I understand there are 50 new social homes being planned to be built there. The location is close to a school, which I think sounds like a great place to build new homes. I also understand it is close to a cemetery. I am just hoping you could walk us through some of the planning that has been undertaken to make sure that they are safe and suitable places and that they have got appropriate community amenity.

Simon NEWPORT: Yes. That project was announced, I believe, as part of the housing statement. It certainly is one of the centrepieces of the Regional Housing Fund. Part of the housing statement did call upon various government agencies to look at not only using its current land – and we genuinely take seriously the need to redevelop on our own land and try to keep demolitions to a minimum, as I think we have demonstrated, particularly where the buildings are structurally sound but need to be replaced or we can augment those properties. What we really try to do is, if there is surplus government land available – and this is vacant government land sitting next to, I believe, a council depot; I thought that is what it was when I was down there. It is sitting there at the moment not really being used practically for anything. I do understand a few people exercise their dogs, and as a pet lover, I love that, but it is far more valuable for us to use as housing. I understand there are some members of the community who are objecting to it, and again, I respect their rights to object. We travelled down and tried to work with the council, and again, I respect the fact that they are doing what councils wish to do. We have taken all of the feedback. There have been multiple rounds of community consultation; in fact there is one now being run by the Department of Transport and Planning. We have put the application in for subdivision to the planning department. I believe that closes Monday in terms of the consultation. Then they will do whatever they need to do with regard to consultation, and we will be either confirmed or otherwise in terms of whether or not we are granted approval.

We did take very seriously the feedback from community. It was originally slated for 50 social homes, so in fact one of the things we have done is we have now integrated that community to be 30 social homes and 20 affordable homes. These are homes typically for young people – perhaps baristas, cleaners, nurses, teachers or what have you – living in a mixed community. We have also made sure that single-bedroom properties will have their own carport or car space off the street and larger homes will have two spots, so we have addressed car parking. We also offered a park. Unfortunately, the council were not comfortable with the location of the park, so we have nominated to make a contribution to the council and they will put some green space in somewhere else. We have certainly worked with council as best as we possibly could. Unfortunately, we just could not come to an arrangement with the council, and I regret that. So now, given the fact that we have a large waitlist in Colac and surrounds, we have decided to avail ourselves of a state significant project.

Mathew HILAKARI: That includes a big waitlist of people who are looking for single-bedroom households, which I understand from previous hearings are one of those things that are really needed across our public and social housing sector.

Simon NEWPORT: Yes, it is, and certainly in the overall waitlist – and I could pull up Colac – if you add one bedrooms and two bedrooms together, that is over 85 per cent of the waitlist, so it is very significant. We do have an underutilisation issue in some communities. Typically it might be potentially elderly people or perhaps people who have had a large family and their family have all moved out – they are often in a three- or four-bedroom home and sometimes just on their own. Sometimes it gets too much for them – a lawn gets too much for them – and what we will do and Mr O’Kelly’s staff will do is actively take these people to these beautiful new homes when they are built and offer them to them first, and then that way we will refurbish that existing family home and help two families. Building smaller homes can also help larger families at the same time, if that makes any sense.

Mathew HILAKARI: Yes. Thank you. It does. Whether it is Flemington or Colac, I really wish you all success in getting more people into homes, because that is a critical role that government plays, so thank you to everyone in the department for that work. I might take us to the PAEC questionnaire, page 21, around the LGBTQI+ strategy implementation. Secretary, I am just hoping you can talk to the *Pride in our Future* strategy, particularly with reference to the QHub – what that program undertakes and some of the successes I am hoping to hear about.

Peta McCAMMON: Sure. I will make a start, and then maybe Ms Green can talk to QHub specifically. Obviously, as you are aware, the *Pride in our Future: Victoria’s LGBTIQA+ Strategy*, which was released in 2022, is a 10-year strategy. There are a range of reforms under *Pride in our Future*, which have laid the solid foundation to support the growth, self-sufficiency, visibility and resilience of the LGBTIQA+ community and services across Victoria. The strategy focuses on ensuring services across Victoria are equitable, inclusive and accessible to drive equality for the community. The strategy was informed and shaped by more than 1600 contributions from LGBTIQA+ people, organisations and allies. It is a whole-of-government framework, and it guides work with our cross-government partner –

Mathew HILAKARI: Is it usual to get such a high quality and high number of engagements?

Peta McCAMMON: A lot of people are engaged in several of our strategies, but yes, 1600 contributions is a lot. Sorry, you have thrown me off there.

Mathew HILAKARI: Sorry, I have completely taken you off your train of thought.

Peta McCAMMON: As I said, it is a whole-of-government framework because obviously there is a small team and it is a bit like some of the work we do in disability in that what we actually need is commitment across all of government to ensure that all our services are actually inclusive for all members of Victoria, but particularly LGBTIQA+ people, who can often face discrimination in accessing services. That can contribute to the poorer outcomes that we do see for LGBTIQA people within Victoria still, despite all of the work that has been undertaken. But I might see if Ms Green wants to continue. Particularly, there was a question around QHub as well.

Rachael GREEN: To go to QHub, that was an investment back in 2022–23 – a really important recognition in relation to having a place-based service, providing \$3.2 million to really look at safe and inclusive spaces for LGBTIQA+ people in western Victoria. It is for people up to the age of 25 and their families, providing mental health supports, social connection and wellbeing. We do know, through the testing we are doing for other things, that that kind of early intervention is critical, particularly in relation to mental health further down the track. The first site, in Ballarat, was opened in December 2023 and then Geelong opened in February 2024. There are the two physical sites, and then there is the outreach to the Surf Coast and online. In terms of some outcomes data, as of 25 March 154 young people have accessed that mental health and wellbeing support at QHub, and community engagement reached more than 7000 people through school visits and learning. I think the other thing, going to the Secretary’s point about the broader work, is the role of the commissioner is probably really important to call out – Joe Ball’s work in the level of advocacy and support he undertakes across the whole range of different sectors around how we really build safe and inclusive spaces and

understanding. I think this is a really important service element, but the work that goes on more broadly around it to raise awareness in relation to the need for these kinds of supports is really critical.

Mathew HILAKARI: Thank you for that. There is nothing more important than people feeling safe in our community, in all senses of that. I was hoping to also discuss the trans and gender-diverse peer support initiative, if you have got any details on that, over the course of the 2024–25 year.

Rachael GREEN: Sure. This is another one that has been very much supported by the commissioner and also delivered in partnership by Transgender Victoria, so a really key investment alongside the suite, as you have referred to and as the Secretary has referred to. In 2024–25 the government provided \$433,000 through the portfolio's competitive equality grants program to support a further nine projects that directly meet the needs in relation to that. This is an important part of that, so \$2 million over four years will continue this program. It has been developed by and for trans, gender-diverse and non-binary people, and as I said, delivered in partnership.

The intent of the program is to provide a range of trauma-informed engagement activities, again, fostering social connections and development opportunities for that cohort of Victorians, looking again at employment skills programs, including the annual Trans and Gender Diverse Job Fair; peer navigation services to navigate complex health systems; social affirmation services; disability support groups; and wellbeing initiatives such as group-based activities like mindful movement, nature therapy and so on. The program now has a physical site called the Affirmation Station. This has a drop-in space, which we know is a really important element about providing connection and doing it in the real. The external evaluation found that 98 per cent would recommend it. I think some of the stats in the performance output talk about the level at which that target has been reached and beyond, because I think there is clearly such a need for some specific, targeted and specialist support.

Mathew HILAKARI: I am going to be limited on time, so I am going to take you to one more program before I move on to a different area, which is The Unsaid Says A Lot campaign. It was wrapped up in 2024–25, so that was the end of the funding point. I would like to hear a little bit about the campaign and how it has been delivered, but also if it has got a long tail associated to it beyond the paid component of the campaign.

Rachael GREEN: It is one that has been picked up, as I am sure you know, by the ACT and Tasmania as well, so enormously successful – 3.6 million media impressions, almost 1.2 million unique users and 3000 web page views –

Mathew HILAKARI: Did you say 1.2 million unique users?

Rachael GREEN: I did.

Mathew HILAKARI: That is amazing.

Rachael GREEN: It is amazing, yes. It has had a really broad reach – an extremely effective campaign. It was a finalist at the IPAA Awards.

Mathew HILAKARI: Surely it won?

Rachael GREEN: It did not.

Peta McCAMMON: To be fair, it was pipped by pads and tampons.

Rachael GREEN: That is true.

Mathew HILAKARI: Okay. How do you pick your favourite?

Peta McCAMMON: I know – it was a very difficult evening.

Rachael GREEN: Yes, I think it has a long tail and was really, really well supported by the community.

Mathew HILAKARI: Thank you so much, Ms Green. Secretary, I am going to take us to budget paper 3, page 36, youth programs, and particularly around innovative support to re-engage young people. There was

\$3.6 million allocated to this campaign as part of the Living Learning program, supporting young people. I was hoping, if you have any details on some of the works that were done there during the 2024–25 budget year –

Peta McCAMMON: Yes. The Living Learning program is a fantastic program, and I actually got the opportunity to go to the Hester Hornbrook Academy, with Ms Green, actually. It was fantastic to actually see the amazing work that they do and the model that is in place there.

Mathew HILAKARI: They have just opened up a campus in Werribee.

Peta McCAMMON: Yes. And the different model of education that they have got there to try and keep disengaged kids in school, it is – yes, they get the opportunity.

Mathew HILAKARI: I have thrown your train of thought again, haven't I? That is the second time I have done that.

Peta McCAMMON: No, no. But I would say, obviously picking up on that, that the Living Learning program supports young people aged 15 to 24 who are disengaged from education or employment and living with mental health conditions. As you said, the program was supported by an investment in the 2024–25 budget, and it is delivered with Melbourne City Mission at its independent specialist school, the Hester Hornbrook Academy. Since launching in 2021, the program has supported more than 216 people to re-engage with education and transition into training or employment. When you think about those numbers, that is life changing for those individuals to get them to re-engage with education and move on to training and employment. It is an innovative and person-centred approach which provides tailored mental health and wellbeing wraparound supports to help young people get back on track.

The young people who participate have highly complex needs and sometimes face barriers such as housing instability, risks of homelessness, family violence and contact with child protection or the justice system. The participants have intersecting service use patterns and require intensive support that is not always conducive to a mainstream school environment. At the Living Learning program there is a multidisciplinary team of key workers including psychologists and occupational and family therapists to deliver holistic and high-quality wraparound supports. Other supports provided through the program include individualised education interventions for specific learning needs such as dyslexia and neurodiversity, intensive case management to support referrals to other services such as housing, and group-based activities to improve social connections and wellbeing. The program utilises trauma-informed activities, including nature-based learning activities, which have proven therapeutic benefits for improving mental health and building resilience.

These wraparound supports give young people the chance to gain practical skills in a safe, respectful and productive environment; engage mental health supports as and when they are needed; work towards their goals in a supported way, including the attainment of a senior secondary school certificate; and take charge of their future and gain independence. As well as supporting young people, the program's holistic approach also encourages the involvement of families, with a family therapist working with parents and carers to build positive relationships. It is an outcome driven program with robust data that is used to show program effectiveness, and this has been backed by independent program evaluations. It started as a partnership addressing disadvantage, which we call a PAD. The PADs bring together the public, private and not-for-profit sectors to deliver innovative programs that tackle complex social issues, and they include a focus on evaluation and outcomes. It is now funded under the government's early intervention investment framework, which provides an ongoing opportunity to effectively measure the outcomes and impacts of the program.

There is strong evidence that the Living Learning program improves young people's mental and physical health and wellbeing, with several participants noting that the program was life changing. In particular, the program has shown that it alleviates young people's anxiety and distress related to classroom and school settings and improves mental health literacy, self-advocacy and help-seeking behaviours. The evaluations have also found that the program has supported young people to form positive and fulfilling relationships, which has many downstream health and wellbeing benefits. The department's partnership with Melbourne City Mission and the program's flexible approach have allowed the program to innovate and adapt over time to ensure the best outcomes for young people. This level of support is definitely not required for all young people, but those that need it get significant benefits out of the program. We do have a case study, if you are happy to go into a case study in the last minute?

Mathew HILAKARI: I might just want to hear about an award-winning campaign and program that we have been running, which is the free pads and tampons campaign.

Peta McCAMMON: Well, you have summed it up: award-winning campaign.

Mathew HILAKARI: That is right: well-known award winner.

Rachael GREEN: I went and saw one today down at State Library. It is sensational. So it is an award-winning campaign, and I am getting my further detail about that campaign.

Mathew HILAKARI: I understand we are trying to roll out 1300 by the end of this financial year.

Rachael GREEN: That is right. 1500 is the election commitment.

Mathew HILAKARI: Sorry, 1500. And how far along are we?

Rachael GREEN: We are close. We are getting there. We are spreading out; we are going across to rural areas. Let me find exactly where we are up to right now: 744 machines.

Mathew HILAKARI: 744 machines. Thank you. You just beat the bell.

Rachael GREEN: 444 venues across the state.

Mathew HILAKARI: Thank you so much.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. Secretary and officials, thank you very much for appearing before the committee this afternoon. The committee will follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing, and responses are required within five working days of the committee's request.

I would also like to thank all secretaries and officers who have given evidence to the committee today, Hansard, the secretariat and parliamentary attendants. I would also like to thank the hospitality, security and cleaning staff who have looked after all of us today. I would also like to acknowledge all of those who have appeared before the committee throughout this week as part of the financial and performance outcomes inquiry. We understand the time and the effort required, and I would like to thank all witnesses on behalf of the committee. I would also like to thank all parliamentary staff who have helped to ensure the hearings were conducted in a professional and timely manner.

This marks the end of the public hearings for the financial and performance outcomes inquiry.

I declare this hearing adjourned.

Committee adjourned.