

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Budget estimates 2020-21 (Wynne)

Melbourne—Friday, 18 December 2020

MEMBERS

Ms Lizzie Blandthorn—Chair

Mr Richard Riordan—Deputy Chair

Mr Sam Hibbins

Mr David Limbrick

Mr Gary Maas

Mr Danny O'Brien

Ms Pauline Richards

Mr Tim Richardson

Ms Nina Taylor

Ms Bridget Vallenge

WITNESSES

Mr Richard Wynne, MP, Minister for Housing,

Mr Ben Rimmer, Senior Deputy Secretary, Housing, and Director of Housing,

Mr Greg Stenton, Deputy Secretary, Corporate Services,

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

Mr David Snadden, Executive Director, Asset Management, Homes Victoria, and

Ms Sherri Bruinhout, Executive Director, Housing Pathways and Outcomes, Department of Health and Human Services.

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

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

On behalf of the Parliament, the committee is conducting this Inquiry into the 2020–21 Budget Estimates. Its aim is to scrutinise public administration and finance to improve outcomes for the Victorian community.

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

All mobile telephones should now be turned to silent.

All evidence taken by this committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. Comments repeated outside this hearing may not be protected by this privilege.

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

We welcome Minister Wynne, in the first instance for consideration of the housing portfolio, and we invite you to make a 5-minute presentation, which will be followed by questions from the committee. Thank you.

Mr WYNNE: Thank you very much, Chair, and thank you to members of the committee. Can I also acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting today, the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nations, and I pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging.

Joining me today on my left is the CEO of Homes Victoria, Ben Rimmer, who of course is also the director of housing. To my right is Sherri Bruinhout, the executive director, housing pathways and outcomes. David Snadden, the executive director of housing asset management, is to her left. Argiri Alisandratos is the deputy secretary, children, families, communities and disability, and he is down the end. To the left of Mr Rimmer is Greg Stenton, the deputy secretary of corporate services. They, as appropriate, will answer questions as requested.

Visual presentation.

Mr WYNNE: I can start with my presentation, Chair. So \$5.3 billion of course, which we got in the budget, is a huge investment. It is the biggest investment by a state government ever in public and social housing in the history of state governments across Australia. Indeed it eclipses the contribution by the federal government during the Rudd years of the GFC. We will build 12 000 homes over those four years: 9000 social housing—1100 old public housing stock will be replaced—and 2900 affordable homes will be built with at least a 10 per cent increase to social housing stock. We will specifically target allocations to 2000 people on the waiting list who are suffering the challenges of mental illness. One-thousand homes will be allocated to Aboriginal Victorians, and 1000 homes will be allocated to victim-survivors a family violence. We believe that this commitment will generate at least \$6.7 billion in economic activity and create 10 000 jobs per year.

And \$1.4 billion dollars of this investment in housing and homeless services input is also part of our commitment, an investment increase from 2019 of 118 per cent. One hundred and fifty-five million dollars has been made available to implement coronavirus prevention measures in public housing, \$11 million to support staff in hotels where people who are experiencing homelessness and rough sleeping are currently residing, and \$7.5 million has been allocated to the recovery project at the North Melbourne and Flemington estates.

The graph that you see up there I think is quite important, because the blue and yellow lines are public housing, using the scale on the left. The black line is Victoria as a whole, indicating active cases in Victoria for infections and active cases in the high-rise estates. You can see that as cases were climbing in Victoria they were rapidly declining in North Melbourne and Flemington after we intervened. North Melbourne and Flemington hit a peak of 228 infections on 18 July, with at least a similar number of close contacts as well. You will note from the graph that they hit zero active cases on 21 September when there were still 624 active cases statewide, and we reached zero more than a month later on 26 October. Clearly the measures that we put in place worked, and they saved lives.

Our \$150 million to extend emergency hotel accommodation for up to 2000 Victorians is also part of our intervention. We will be providing headleasing and purchasing of over 1000 homes for people to move into whilst giving them wraparound support to help them on a pathway into long-term housing. Currently there are about 1845 households in hotel accommodation.

My final slide, Chair, is a commitment of \$18.2 million over two years to fund staff and operations for two new and 13 redeveloped core and cluster refuges, which I know is a critical investment as part of our response to family violence. The completion of the refuges is expected in 2020–21. That is my presentation, Chair.

The CHAIR: Great. Thank you. I will pass to the Deputy Chair, Mr Richard Riordan.

Mr RIORDAN: Thanks, Chair. Welcome, Minister and team. Budget paper 3, page 82. The budget provides for the ongoing social housing capital upgrade program. However, we have received correspondence from a Mr Ronald Coleman living in Jackson Street, St Kilda. Now, he has had a leaking roof, mouldy walls and carpets. His property has been ‘upgraded’—in inverted commas—with the installation of new kitchens and bathrooms, which I am sure he is appreciative of, in six of the 19 units, but instead of repairing the roof and the fences, which are falling over, the priorities seem to have been mixed up. What level of inspections are conducted at these public housing properties before the upgrades are done?

Mr WYNNE: What level of inspection?

Mr RIORDAN: Yes. I mean, rather than someone just saying, ‘We’re going to put all new kitchens in’ and leaking roofs and mouldy walls and other things are left unattended to in an upgrade. How does that work?

Mr WYNNE: In the first instance of course, I mean, we have committed significant funds towards our maintenance and upgrade program, with the \$500 million that we have allocated to build and upgrade community and public housing under the building works package. So we have got a significant amount of money there, and obviously a further \$30 million will be invested in disability accommodation as well. It aims to provide critical investment. I think that is where you are going to—

Mr RIORDAN: My question is: what is the level of inspection before these properties are done?

Mr WYNNE: Yes, well, I will come to that—in maintenance upgrade and refurbishment projects. So I think the allocation that we have provided is significant, at \$500 million, but in relation to the particular asset management question that you raise, I would be happy for the Director of Housing to provide you with some insights into how they go about both the contracting and the inspectorial services as well, if that is okay.

Mr RIORDAN: Yes.

Mr RIMMER: Thanks, Mr Riordan. Each area of DHHS operationally has a team that are responsible for a particular group of public housing assets, homes. There is a regular inspection cycle for those assets, and we also receive, as you would expect, complaints and feedback and ideas from tenants very regularly about what is going on with their houses. The new money that is now available for maintenance is very well known to the operational teams, and they are spending it—I have to be frank with you—with some speed and fervour, which

is good, because it is driving economic activity. If there is a specific question—I think you mentioned a particular address.

Mr RIORDAN: Yes, there is a specific address. So I can perhaps give that to you after?

Mr RIMMER: I would be very happy to follow that up for you, Mr Riordan.

Mr RIORDAN: All right. Well another one, with the 2 minutes left, I would like to clarify—and this is really important for many country areas, and my area specifically—is in your Big Build budget 61 per cent of the \$1.25 billion has been allocated. Of that allocated budget there are some real anomalies. For example, Geelong has 7 per cent of the public housing waiting list and is going to receive 31 per cent of that. An area that I represent, and particularly the township of Colac, gets zero and has no funding allocated. Now, even more galling, really, is that there has been a strong community effort by non-profit and other community organisations trying to get more social and community housing for a real crisis in our community, and you specifically will not let the department deal with them. So where is the equity in the allocation of this funding for people? If you are in need, you are in need, and country Victoria is really missing out.

Mr WYNNE: Well, they are not missing out, Mr Riordan. I do not agree with that. So 25 per cent of the investment of the Big Build, as you rightly indicate, is allocated to regional and rural Victoria.

Mr RIORDAN: But we are 37 per cent of the emergency housing waiting list.

Mr WYNNE: And as I will indicate in my answer to you, we are open to partnerships right across regional Victoria, whether they are from the not-for-profit sector or whether they are partnerships with local governments themselves. I mean, we have not allocated all of these funds, absolutely not. We will be looking for opportunities right across the state; Colac, of course, along with many other regional cities will have an opportunity not only to participate but we will be certainly looking for partnerships.

Mr RIORDAN: So some early advice put out by your department, that there are areas that will not get it—you are saying that is not true?

Mr RIMMER: Mr Riordan, I am sorry, there has never been advice put out to that effect. There are certainly local government areas of Victoria which have a minimum investment guarantee, and other local government areas are able to access a whole range of other money on top of that. So all areas of Victoria—

Mr RIORDAN: Are eligible.

Mr RIMMER: are able to access money.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mr Gary Maas, MP.

Mr WYNNE: So the answer is: Colac will not be precluded—absolutely not.

Mr RIORDAN: Thank you very much.

Mr WYNNE: And I will get you an answer to the planning question before we finish today.

The CHAIR: Mr Maas.

Mr MAAS: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Minister and to your team as well for appearing today. I would like to take you to the topic of public housing outbreak prevention and specifically budget paper 3 at page 64 and the \$401 million investment. Could you take us through how this investment has prevented and indeed will prevent coronavirus outbreaks in high-risk settings?

Mr WYNNE: Thanks, Mr Maas, for the question. In July the department established a comprehensive preventative health program across the 48 high-rise public housing properties to prevent coronavirus outbreaks in those settings. They included a very significant range—a comprehensive range—of strategies, including a health concierge service; onsite COVID testing and support; individual household support plans; daily outreach by community health nurses to confirmed cases of close contact; door-to-door welfare checks by health and community services representatives, with onsite and on-call interpreters; additional cleaning and sanitising, with

each public housing high-rise tower having its touch points and common areas cleaned five times per day and sanitation cleaned once a week, and floors with any known case of the virus being cleaned; installation of hand sanitiser dispensers on all floors; and infection prevention and control. And absolutely fundamental to this has been the engagement of local community leaders and commissioning local community organisations to deliver public health messages to encourage residents to get tested and to direct feedback from residents as well.

Mr Maas, currently there are around 14 500 residents living in high-rise towers, and we have tested in the order of 12 800—tests that were administered on site at these estates. We distributed close to 1.5 million masks, sanitisers and so forth. I think that the response that we in fact made is really verified by the graph that I put up earlier, where it was very clear that we needed to get on top of obviously the outbreaks at the two estates of North Melbourne and Flemington but also provide a comprehensive response across the other 48 towers as well, because there is a clear commonality in terms of the structure of those buildings. When you have a common entry point, common lifts, common walkways and a shared laundry on each floor, these are obvious potential infection points. That is why we put in place what I think has been a really significant intervention.

Yes, we did have some minor outbreaks that were of course reported. We had some small outbreaks in Carlton, on the Carlton estate, which we got on top of, a couple in Collingwood and a couple in Richmond, in the towers, but we managed to get on top of them really quickly and ensure that there was no infection running rampant in those towers.

Mr MAAS: Thank you, Minister. You made reference to the residents in the Flemington and North Melbourne estates. What specific investments have been made to support these residents and how will these investments work?

Mr WYNNE: Thank you very much for the question. It has been a very tough time—a very, very tough time. As I said yesterday in the press conference, we absolutely acknowledge the distress that was caused to residents by the intervention that we had to make. It was important that we acknowledge that. In that context, as I said, what is very clear from the graph that you have just seen is that that intervention knocked down the virus very, very quickly, and it was eliminated across the high-rise towers, as I indicated in the graph that you have just seen. But in that context I thought it was very important that we continue to provide really important supports to that community, so—

The CHAIR: That is the conclusion of the member's time.

Mr WYNNE: Is that it?

The CHAIR: Perhaps the line can be picked up somewhere else.

Mr WYNNE: Maybe I can come back to it again.

The CHAIR: Yes. Mr Sam Hibbins, MP.

Mr HIBBINS: Thank you, Chair. And thank you, Minister, and your team for appearing this afternoon. I think we can continue on with the topics raised by Mr Maas. But first I want to ask: was the decision to have an immediate lockdown of the towers the explicit recommendation of the chief health officer?

Mr WYNNE: Yes, it was.

Mr HIBBINS: For an immediate lockdown?

Mr WYNNE: Thank you, Mr Hibbins. It is a question that was canvassed yesterday, as you know, in the press conference and was canvassed at some length by the Ombudsman herself. Dr van Diemen was the chief health officer responsible at that time. Through her work she has a legal obligation to ensure that in making her directions, regardless of whether it is in relation to the housing or indeed other directions that she has had to make more broadly for the community, she is cognisant of her legal obligations and indeed her human rights obligations as well in making those decisions. In that context and in relation to the high-rise towers at Flemington and North Melbourne, she was involved as part of a public health-chaired outbreak management team, of which Dr van Diemen was a part not on all occasions but her staff attended definitely, a week prior to the decision to lock down the towers. She was acutely aware of the situation that was emerging. There is no doubt about that, and indeed from her own testimony to the Ombudsman she is quoted as saying she was

terrified of the potential outcome for the residents living in those towers, particularly I think 33 Alfred Street, which was the locus of much of the early infections.

Mr HIBBINS: I just want to be clear about what I am asking, and that is in relation to not just the lockdown and the need for a lockdown and obviously the associated health risks but the immediacy of it. From the Ombudsman's report the evidence shows that the deputy chief health officer—chief health officer at the time—was actually expecting the lockdown to occur some hours, if not days—

Mr WYNNE: Not days.

Mr HIBBINS: Some hours after it was first said that it was needed.

Mr WYNNE: Yes.

Mr HIBBINS: But she was actually informed by the cabinet it was a decision of cabinet to have an immediate lockdown.

Mr WYNNE: It was a cabinet subcommittee.

Mr HIBBINS: Yes. The evidence shows that it was not the advice of the chief health officer to have an immediate lockdown.

Mr WYNNE: Mr Hibbins, this question was canvassed at some length yesterday. I answered it pretty comprehensively yesterday, but I will answer it again for you today. The answer to the question is there is no doubt that Dr van Diemen was absolutely clear that we needed to have the lockdown. That is not disputed and indeed is not disputed either by the Ombudsman, and in fact it is generally agreed that this was the correct intervention. The question that you go to is the timing of it, and the cabinet committee took the view—correctly in my view, absolutely correctly, given that this virus was raging out of control in that 33 Alfred Street block—that it would be appropriate to intervene as soon as possible. And in that context, which I fully supported by the way—I fully supported and I was consulted on this—I think the important question that has to be considered here is: if we had waited to the next day, people who would have contracted the virus would have been free to engage on the estate.

Mr HIBBINS: The issue here—

Mr WYNNE: And I simply remind you, Mr Hibbins, as you would know because you do host public housing as well in your electorate, that next door to the 33 Alfred Street tower was a 12-storey tower of elderly persons units, probably not much further distant than where you and I are now. The chances of people who are the most vulnerable in our community, with very significant health issues, being infected was an enormous risk, and Dr van Diemen herself said she was absolutely terrified about the potential deleterious health outcomes that may have occurred through this outbreak.

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

Mr D O'BRIEN: Thank you, Chair, and I will continue, Minister, on this issue. You have just mentioned, first of all, that you were consulted by the Crisis Council of Cabinet, is that right?

Mr WYNNE: That is correct.

Mr D O'BRIEN: And you were comfortable with the decision to go to the immediate lockdown?

Mr WYNNE: That is correct.

Mr D O'BRIEN: We have heard you say, and we have heard the Ombudsman say, that ultimately it was the right decision to lock down the towers.

Mr WYNNE: Correct.

Mr D O'BRIEN: I do not think anyone is not acknowledging that. The question, though, and what the Ombudsman recommended, Minister, is that the immediacy of it caused enormous distress, enormous harm to people, and it left people without food, left them without medicine, and for many people who had already come

from traumatic backgrounds it had caused additional trauma. You would not apologise for that yesterday. Why will you not apologise for it?

Mr WYNNE: Frankly, Mr O'Brien, I have very little more to add to the commentary that I provided yesterday save and except to say that I just want to read in to you some of the observations of the Ombudsman herself.

The opinions in this report are not a criticism of the Deputy Chief Health Officer or the many hundreds of public officials dealing with the crisis, with its huge logistical challenges. People laboured heroically into the winter nights, above and beyond their official duties, to support the residents and respond to the public health emergency.

There was—

Mr D O'BRIEN: And everyone accepts that, Minister—

Mr WYNNE: There is no question about that—

Mr D O'BRIEN: There is no question about it. But in the cold light of day why can the government not just say, 'Look, we did the right thing. We saved people from a much more deleterious outbreak'—

Mr WYNNE: I mean, the simple facts are we saved people's lives.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Yes. But why can you not say, 'We're sorry we had to do it so quickly with no notice and caused enormous extra distress'?

Mr WYNNE: Well, Mr O'Brien, I will not apologise for saving people's lives. I will not. I will not.

Mr D O'BRIEN: No, but you can apologise for the way it happened.

Mr WYNNE: I have no further commentary to make on the matter, Mr O'Brien.

Mr D O'BRIEN: What commentary do you have on the Ombudsman's finding that the decision to go to an immediate lockdown was contrary to the law?

Mr WYNNE: We fundamentally disagree with that, and we reject it. We absolutely reject it, and we provided a very detailed response to the Ombudsman—

Mr D O'BRIEN: Of your legal advice?

Mr WYNNE: Well, yes. Absolutely. Well, the advice of the department, which was subject of course to some legal considerations—of course it was. But the point is that the process is that you get a draft report some days before—I think it was about a week before—where the department is provided with the opportunity to correct any inaccuracies that may be a part of the report and to provide feedback to the Ombudsman. That feedback was provided extensively to the Ombudsman and was tabled in her report at appendix A, and it is there for people to review as they wish.

Mr D O'BRIEN: So ultimately on the law issue it is a difference of opinion between the Ombudsman and the government, I guess.

Mr WYNNE: Well, you could call it a difference of opinion. We fundamentally do not agree that the actions that were taken were unlawful or in breach of the charter.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Just a final question. You have told this committee before and the Parliament many times of your deep involvement in the public housing community and your—

Mr WYNNE: Indeed.

Mr D O'BRIEN: I think you have actually said the term that they are 'your people'.

Mr WYNNE: They are.

Mr D O'BRIEN: So you must have been distressed about this. I am just trying to get to the point as to why it is so difficult to apologise—for the government to apologise and for you as the housing minister. I can come to one conclusion, and that is that the government clearly has a fight going on with the Ombudsman now and just does not want to give her the satisfaction of responding to her report. Is that right?

Mr WYNNE: No, Mr O'Brien. That is simply not the case. We absolutely respect the work. I respect the work of the Ombudsman, the government respects the work of the Ombudsman. She conducts her activities unfettered and she has produced—

Mr D O'BRIEN: Well, she is fettered by budget constraints at the moment, Minister, to be honest.

Mr WYNNE: That is a question that has been canvassed fairly widely. I do not seek to provide any further comment in relation to that, but—

Mr D O'BRIEN: Can I finish on one: if you were faced with this exact situation again, and it is possible, would you do exactly what you just did again?

Mr WYNNE: Yes, I would. Absolutely. And I can say that, Mr O'Brien, because—

Mr D O'BRIEN: Would you not give the residents at least a few hours notice?

Mr WYNNE: I have answered your question—if we had to do it again; if we had to do it in a public housing tower or indeed in a private residential building that was raging out of control with infection, with some of the most vulnerable people in our community. You say that they are my people. Absolutely they are. They live at the end of my street, Mr O'Brien. These are the people I live with.

Mr D O'BRIEN: But even on that, I mean, the people across the street actually did—

The CHAIR: Mr O'Brien, your time has expired. I would remind all members that we are here to consider the budget estimates. The call is with Ms Pauline Richards, MP.

Ms RICHARDS: Thank you, Minister. I thought I would return to the budget estimates—

Mr D O'BRIEN: The minister referenced this—

The CHAIR: Mr O'Brien, you have had your turn.

Ms RICHARDS: budget paper 3, page 64, and I am going to continue on perhaps to let you expand a little bit more on the discussion you were having earlier with Mr Maas about the investment that has been made in the Flemington and North Melbourne estates. I think you had only just started to unpack that, and I thought if you wanted to add anything more to it, I would give you that opportunity.

Mr WYNNE: Thanks Ms Richards. In relation to the North Melbourne and Flemington towers, we have committed \$7.5 million towards really recognising that there are some significant opportunities available for us to support those tenants, particularly in relation to training, education pathways and employment as well. So we have managed to secure 40 jobs there, but we think we can do a whole lot more in that space. That is about, I think, recognising that this has been a very, very, very challenging time for that community, and that the government should reach out, absolutely. We should reach out with a welcoming and helping hand to say, 'Look, we are with you'—and I will always be with them. That is why I think that that funding is appropriate and well targeted to support that community.

The other thing that has been really important is the really excellent relationship that has been established with our community health centres. The community health centres are now likely to re-establish themselves, if not on the estate, with the outreach programs into the estate for all of the broader health-related activities that are attached to community health. I think that is fantastic. And that is off the back of, of course, that they were fundamental in driving the health response on both of those estates.

Ms RICHARDS: Thank you, Minister. I am interested in exploring other high-risk settings and gaining some understanding from you about what other high-risk settings there are and what systems have been put in place for those other types of accommodation.

Mr WYNNE: Sorry—this was?

Ms RICHARDS: Other high-risk settings—high-risk accommodation responses in other places.

Mr WYNNE: Well, I think I have canvassed that in part in my earlier answers.

Ms RICHARDS: Rooming houses?

Mr WYNNE: Absolutely. Clearly there are other settings apart from the towers. I have already, I think, given you a comprehensive oversight as to our interventions there. But we have used those learnings to ensure that we apply those lessons to rooming houses and supported residential services—again it is that classic circumstance where residents are sharing common facilities—for example, kitchens and so forth. The high-risk accommodation response has been established in 26 catchment areas, including obviously our towers and our low-rise estates, to ensure that we are prepared and that the prevention measures are in place.

I indicated earlier to Mr Maas's question that our local community health services have been appointed as high-risk accommodation response lead providers, and I think it is entirely appropriate that where you have got a strong local network of community health services they provide the initial response, with government frameworks obviously put in place through the department as well. And we have provided very significant tools and resources to support those lead providers, particularly community health, to ensure absolutely that they are working very, very collaboratively with the residents themselves. Because we know—and I think we all know—that the success of these programs is in both the relationship between residents and the services themselves, particularly where you have got a number of tenancies where people have come from a non-English-speaking background.

Ms RICHARDS: Terrific. Thank you, Minister. I think my time is just about up, so thank you.

Mr WYNNE: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Richards. Mr Sam Hibbins.

Mr HIBBINS: Thank you, Chair. Bringing us back to what we were discussing earlier, on 11 August before this committee the Premier told us:

There is no alternative but to accept the advice of the Chief Health Officer, and part of the advice of the Chief Health Officer was to have an immediate lockdown ...

Is that an accurate statement?

Mr WYNNE: Yes, it is. Your point, Mr Hibbins, is?

Mr HIBBINS: In our previous discussion, you said that it was a cabinet decision to have an immediate lockdown, not one of—

Mr RICHARDSON: On a point of order, Chair, I am just wondering what budget paper reference this is and whether Mr Hibbins has found his way into the COVID hearing post the budget—

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mr Hibbins, do you have a budget paper reference?

Mr HIBBINS: Yes, (a) it is in the presentation and (b) budget paper 3, page 68, 'Coronavirus (COVID-19) social services response'.

Mr WYNNE: Mr Hibbins, I will simply repeat for you that the decision to intervene in the towers at North Melbourne in Flemington was a public health response, which was signed off by Dr van Diemen.

Mr HIBBINS: For which you gave 15 minutes.

Mr WYNNE: Can I be any clearer with you than that?

Mr D O'BRIEN: You said it was a cabinet decision before.

Mr WYNNE: No, that is not—I have been very clear.

Mr HIBBINS: Well, I am asking whether that decision was based on the advice of the chief health officer—whether they advised you to have an immediate lockdown.

Mr WYNNE: The advice of the chief health officer, Mr Hibbins, was to shut the towers down—shut them down. And I quote, she was ‘terrified’.

Mr HIBBINS: Immediately?

Mr WYNNE: Can I be any clearer with you? I have answered your question, Mr Hibbins.

Mr RIORDAN: Having met the residents, they were pretty terrified.

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, you do not have the call.

Mr WYNNE: And as you know, Mr Hibbins, it is the legal responsibility of the chief health officer to sign the notice. He signed it.

Mr HIBBINS: So when the Premier said that there was no alternative—

Mr WYNNE: Mr Hibbins, I cannot pursue this any further. You can continue if you wish, but I am simply telling you what the facts of the matter are.

Mr HIBBINS: Well, I think that speaks for itself.

Mr WYNNE: Well, you make your own judgement, sir.

The CHAIR: Mr Hibbins, do you have subsequent questions?

Mr HIBBINS: Well, I think we are using the evidence.

Mr WYNNE: The simple facts of this, Mr Hibbins, are undeniable—by the intervention of this government—

Mr HIBBINS: Well, that is not my question.

Mr WYNNE: we saved people’s lives. It is as simple as that. And I do not resile from that for one minute.

Mr HIBBINS: I am simply asking whether—my point is whether the Premier gave us accurate evidence at a prior hearing.

Mr WYNNE: I have nothing further to add, Mr Hibbins. I have answered your question.

Mr HIBBINS: Clearly people at the estate, residents at the estate—they went without food, they went without medicine for days and there were a number of serious issues. Why won’t you apologise?

Mr WYNNE: Mr Hibbins, are you seriously trying to tell me what happened on the North Melbourne and Flemington housing estates? Are you seriously trying to tell me? I lived through this, and I am not going to allow you—

Mr HIBBINS: Excuse me! No, no, do not get emotional now. Do not get emotional now. Let us talk about the facts. People went without. People went without. People suffered. The Ombudsman—

Mr WYNNE: I have indicated, Mr Hibbins, absolutely, that on the first night it was very challenging. I have never resiled from that. There was no question about that. But by the second day there was no suggestion whatsoever that all of the appropriate services were not all in place—

Mr RIORDAN: Oh, seriously!

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, you do not have the call.

Mr WYNNE: I am sorry, Mr Riordan, were you there?

Mr RIORDAN: Yes, I was. As soon as the community contacted me, I went down there myself.

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, you are out of order!

Mr RIORDAN: I was there on the third day and the food still was not there.

Mr WYNNE: That is simply false. That is simply not true. It is not true, Mr Riordan. It is not true.

Mr RIORDAN: It is absolutely true. I was there myself.

The CHAIR: Deputy Chair, you are out of order!

Mr WYNNE: From our point of view, all of the appropriate services were there in place, whether they be health services, whether they be security services—obviously Victoria Police were there—or other emergency services. Mental health services were there and drug and alcohol services were there. We provided a comprehensive response, Mr Hibbins.

Mr HIBBINS: After one day.

Mr WYNNE: Too right. Absolutely, we did.

Mr RIORDAN: Oh, Minister!

The CHAIR: Deputy Chair, you are out of order.

Mr HIBBINS: I will not tell you what is—

Mr WYNNE: Oh, you can agree to disagree, Mr Riordan. I do not mind.

Mr RIORDAN: Well, they were not ringing members of Parliament 145 kilometres away because you were doing a good job.

The CHAIR: Deputy Chair, you are out of order, and you do not have the call. The member's time has expired. Mr Tim Richardson, MP.

Mr RICHARDSON: Thank you, Minister. I think people forget that this is life or death. This is not stuffing around here. This is saving people's lives.

Mr WYNNE: Correct.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Everyone has acknowledged that.

Mr RIORDAN: Everyone has acknowledged that. We are talking about—

The CHAIR: Deputy Chair, Mr O'Brien. Deputy Chair, you are out of order.

Mr RICHARDSON: You can provide advice all you like, and you can throw stones from the sidelines.

Mr WYNNE: Mr Riordan, not for a moment would I have said that it was perfect on the first day.

Mr RIORDAN: You just said it was hunky-dory on day 2.

The CHAIR: Deputy Chair! Deputy Chair, you do not have the call.

Mr WYNNE: I did not say—I mean, do not put words in my mouth. That is ridiculous.

Mr RICHARDSON: This is the crew that wanted to open up.

Mr WYNNE: Sorry, Mr Richardson.

Mr RICHARDSON: This is the crew that wanted to open up, so let us not have the crocodile tears now. Taking you, Minister, to a substantial and generational-changing investment at budget paper 3, page 78, I am

wondering for the committee's benefit if you might elaborate a bit more on the Big Housing Build in table 1.14 and how that is helping to provide more affordable housing to Victorians.

Mr WYNNE: Well, I mean, it is a massive amount of money, Mr Richardson, by any measure. As I indicated in the earlier slideshow, the \$5.3 billion is unprecedented, as you know. I mean, you follow this very carefully yourself, I know. We will build over the four years, with all of the announcements that we have made, close to 14 500 units, which will be absolutely extraordinary. The \$5.3 billion will go to 12 000 social and affordable housing homes over the four years. There is \$2.14 billion for public, community and private sector-led developments, \$1.38 billion for community housing developments delivered by the Social Housing Growth Fund and \$948 million for spot purchasing and other innovative partnerships with the private sector. And I say to you, Mr Riordan, we will be looking at Colac. We will be looking to spot purchase at Colac. We will be looking right across the state.

Mr RIORDAN: That we can agree on.

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan.

Mr WYNNE: On that, you and I can agree.

Mr RIORDAN: We can agree.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Sale and Bairnsdale? Because that was the same question—zero.

The CHAIR: Mr O'Brien, you do not have the call.

Mr WYNNE: No, no. Well, I mean, it is a serious response. We are looking actively for opportunities right across Victoria. And regional Victoria not only will have the allocation of \$1.25 billion but also within that of course are the real opportunities that are going to be made available for us through the spot purchase program as well. Five hundred and thirty-eight million dollars will be allocated to construct new homes on existing Victorian government sites, which is using our land much more productively, particularly—which many of you would be familiar with—some of those old concrete walk-up estates which are really well past their useful economic life. To redevelop those estates—they are often very, very well located, so we can pull them down, redevelop and get better densities in place and get a better social outcome for that. So that is terrific. And \$300 million to upgrade obviously an existing housing portfolio, including replacing and upgrading some of those buildings as well with more energy-efficient appliances. So I have got to say, Mr Richardson, it is a ripping opportunity, isn't it?

Mr RICHARDSON: It is.

Mr WYNNE: And I am thrilled to not only take the committee through it but recognise that for all members of this committee there will not be a person here whose electorate will not be a beneficiary of this magnificent budget announcement.

Mr RICHARDSON: No doubt it will change lives and save lives, Minister. In the same sense, the Big Housing Build will also support people in employment and create a significant economic stimulus. I am wondering if you could outline that and how we are building back better from the coronavirus pandemic and how this program will assist.

Mr WYNNE: Well, this stimulus has been really very significant, and not only for its social impact, which of course is so important. It is also incredibly important in terms of its employment generation. So we expect that we will employ annually 10 000 people in direct jobs on the tools but right through the building framework more generally, whether it is architects and surveyors and all of the backroom people and then those of course who come onto the tools and build the properties. So it will be a very significant stimulus to the broader building industry more generally. So that is 10 000 direct jobs, but also it is the supply chain as well, and that is incredibly significant as you know. So if you think about country Victoria, Mr Riordan or Mr O'Brien or Ms Vallence for that matter, think about the interventions that this will make in our regional cities by the sort of money that we will be putting into those areas, whether it is through the spot purchase program or whether it is through—

Mr RIORDAN: I have got a meeting on this next week, Mr Wynne—

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan—

Mr RIORDAN: I will have a plan to you very shortly.

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, you do not have the call.

Mr WYNNE: Bring your plan. The Director of Housing is here, and he is waiting to get it from you.

The CHAIR: The call is with Ms Vallence, MP.

Mr WYNNE: Mr Rimmer is here, and he will be looking forward to hearing—

Mr Riordan interjected.

The CHAIR: Ms Vallence has the call.

Ms VALLENCE: Thank you, Chair. Minister, just to follow on from Mr Maas and Mr Hibbins, this committee in another inquiry has also heard from members of the Australian Muslim Social Services Agency that in terms of the public housing tower situation they felt, and I quote:

Jailed.

And:

... feeling like they were imprisoned.

People:

... felt like they were being criminalised.

Neither the police or DHHS knew who was in control and:

There was no communication ...

The deputy chief health officer recommended a lockdown, as you say, of the public housing towers, but—and I quote from the Ombudsman's report—she:

... did not recommend a lockdown had to take place immediately ...

So ultimately whose decision was it to impose an immediate lockdown?

Mr WYNNE: Well, firstly, I would like to respond to the feedback from the Muslim community—

Ms VALLENCE: Who made the decision? The question was: who made the decision to ultimately take an immediate lockdown?

The CHAIR: Ms Vallence, in your preamble you included the comments of the Muslim association, and Mr Wynne is entitled to reply them.

Mr WYNNE: I want to say something about the Muslim community because they were magnificent—they were absolutely magnificent. Through the lockdown they provided culturally appropriate food to many of the residents who live in those towers—

Ms VALLENCE: Minister, you made them feel jailed. Who ultimately made the decision? The question is direct.

The CHAIR: Ms Vallence, you put a proposition and a question to the minister, and you will allow him to answer it before you repeat it.

Ms VALLENCE: I made no proposition other than asking—

The CHAIR: You did make a proposition. You discussed the activities of the Muslim association and you put that to the minister, and then you asked a follow-up question about the decision. The minister is entitled to respond to both your preamble and your question. If you do not want a preamble answered, do not put one.

Mr WYNNE: I will answer both bits. Do not worry. I will answer both bits, because I want to call out just how magnificent the work of the Muslim community was locally. They did a fantastic job—an absolutely fantastic job. They worked day and night, and—

Ms VALLENCE: We agree on that.

Mr WYNNE: Pardon me?

Ms VALLENCE: We agree on that.

Mr WYNNE: Well, that is good; we agree on something. They really did. They worked day and night for days, and you can imagine the logistical—

Ms VALLENCE: That is because the government had let them down.

The CHAIR: Ms Vallence!

Ms VALLENCE: Who ultimately made the decision to impose an immediate lockdown?

The CHAIR: Ms Vallence, could you allow the minister to complete his answer to your question.

Mr WYNNE: Ms Vallence, you can imagine the challenge of having to support 3000 people—

Ms VALLENCE: It was not the deputy chief health officer who required it to be made immediately.

The CHAIR: Ms Vallence, could you allow the minister to complete the answer to your question.

Ms VALLENCE: Did you make the decision to immediately impose this?

The CHAIR: Ms Vallence!

Mr WYNNE: Ms Vallence, I will finish my contribution in relation to the Muslim community, who did a fantastic job—an absolutely fantastic job. The decision was a decision of the chief health officer. She is the responsible person who has to sign the documentation, and she signed it.

Ms VALLENCE: Did you put pressure on the deputy chief health officer to sign that direction?

Mr WYNNE: Sorry, did I put pressure on—

Ms VALLENCE: Did your government put pressure on the deputy chief health officer to sign that with such a short time frame?

The CHAIR: Ms Vallence.

Mr WYNNE: Utterly wrong, Ms Vallence. Utterly wrong.

Ms VALLENCE: I will refresh your memory of the Ombudsman's report—

The CHAIR: Ms Vallence!

Ms VALLENCE: which expressly states that the deputy chief health officer did not require it to be imposed immediately. So was she put under pressure?

Mr WYNNE: She absolutely was not. That is a completely inappropriate characterisation, and you are wrong.

Ms VALLENCE: So who made the decision?

Mr WYNNE: You are wrong.

The CHAIR: Ms Vallence!

Mr WYNNE: Ms Vallence, I have answered the question now twice—to Mr Hibbins and again to you.

Ms VALLENCE: Minister, were you in the crisis cabinet at the time the decision was made?

Mr WYNNE: Well, if you listened to the press conference yesterday, Ms Vallence, you would be well aware that question was asked of me.

Ms VALLENCE: It is for the benefit of this committee.

Mr WYNNE: No, I was not in the cabinet committee, because I was not a member of the cabinet committee. Was I consulted? Absolutely I was consulted on it, and absolutely I supported it. I supported it then, and I would support it now without question. Did we learn things from this? Of course we did. There is no question about that, but it was the right decision then, it is the right decision now and we saved people's lives.

Ms VALLENCE: Minister, budget paper 3, pages 50 through 73, the Big Housing Build, indicates that it is about an average \$440 000-odd per house for that package, and that is the full asking price of a house on the open market in a number of growth areas with full developer profits built into the asking price. What is the proportion of the \$5.3 billion for new land acquisition? Can we have a breakdown provided to this committee, and how do you assess value?

Mr WYNNE: We would be happy to provide you with an assessment of it as this rolls out—absolutely we will—but we are bound by the valuer-general, obviously, in terms—

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. The member's time has expired.

Mr WYNNE: We will provide it to you.

Ms VALLENCE: Thank you, Minister.

The CHAIR: I will pass the call to Ms Nina Taylor, MLC.

Ms TAYLOR: I just want to follow on regarding the Big Housing Build, because it is so significant and a very important part of stimulating the Victorian economy. How quick is work starting and finishing in order to create jobs and generate economic activity quickly?

Mr WYNNE: Well, Ms Taylor, as I indicated, this is a massive commitment. I can indicate to the committee that the Director of Housing would advise me that they are out there at the moment currently spot purchasing properties. They are doing it now. I mean, clearly the Director of Housing is not out there and the government is not out there with a flashing red light going, 'Here we are with a big chequebook', but certainly through third parties a lot of activity is being generated at the moment, particularly around the spot purchase program. The second thing is that we are out already with six fast-start sites for redevelopment in Hawthorn, Ascot Vale, North Richmond, Ashburton, West Heidelberg and Flemington. So we are up and about, and I think that is really important.

We have released a request to the market for project proposals that are under construction, nearing completion or just need perhaps a few additional sales to get them away. That is why we are looking for opportunities. We are looking for them obviously in metropolitan Melbourne—apart from the sites that we have already identified—and also, as I have indicated, in regional Victoria as well. Because I think we can do better from the close to \$1 billion that we are going to commit to spot purchase by being what I have characterised to the Director of Housing as socially aggressive—he does not particularly like the term, but never mind—and being out there and really looking for opportunities.

Many opportunities have already come in to us from a whole range of areas—local governments, the not-for-profit sector, philanthropy and of course the developer community themselves just saying, 'Well, look, I have got a development. I am about halfway through, can't quite get it away. Are you interested in partnering up with us?'. So these are going to be fantastic opportunities for us going forward, and I am just so thrilled that we will be able to deliver both a fantastic social outcome and a fantastic economic outcome—jobs and stimulus.

Ms TAYLOR: Thank you. Now I would like to move on to initiatives around homelessness, and I refer to budget paper 3, page 64. Could you please explain how the From Homeless to a Home initiative in table 1.13 will help people experiencing homelessness to have somewhere safe to live?

Mr WYNNE: Well, as I indicated in my earlier contribution—actually it was in the slides—we have committed \$150 million to make sure. We have got about 1845 people who are currently households that are in hotels at the moment, and these funds will go directly to not only supporting the people in the hotels through to April of next year but also we will be head leasing over 1000 properties. We are in the process of starting work on that at the moment so that we can give people a transition obviously out of the hotels but crucially also provide them with support. There is no point, particularly for people who may be sleeping rough or be homeless—this is not a lifestyle choice that people make. They often have a multiplicity of problems that have rendered them homeless, and the support packages are incredibly important not only to get them into housing but to maintain their tenancies as well. So it is really a very comprehensive response.

I very much look forward to coming back to PAEC, Chair, and reporting back to you in May or June—whenever we do PAEC next—on how that program has run through. Because it is a really significant intervention that we are making here. If you think about it in the broader context of a homeless intervention, we potentially could end homelessness in this state. I mean, what a magnificent achievement that would be.

The CHAIR: And on that inspiring note, Minister, we have concluded the time set aside for the consideration of the housing estimates.

Mr WYNNE: Thank you very much.

The CHAIR: We thank you for appearing before the committee today. The committee will follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing, and responses will be required within 10 working days of the committee's request.

The committee will take a short break before moving with you to consideration of the planning portfolio.

I declare this hearing adjourned. Thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.