

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2024–25 Financial and Performance Outcomes

Melbourne – Thursday 27 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

Emma Cassar, Secretary,

Kate Fitzgerald, Deputy Secretary, Emergency Management,

Emma Catford, Deputy Secretary, Corrections and Justice Services,

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

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

Nicola Quin, Chief Operating Officer,

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

Kathryn Bannon, Deputy Secretary, Integrity, Regulation and Legal Services,

Adrian Sculthorpe, Deputy Secretary, Aboriginal Justice,

Jodi Henderson, Deputy Secretary, Youth Justice,

Andrea Davidson, Commissioner, Youth Justice,

Larissa Strong, Commissioner, Corrections Victoria,

Samuel Ho, Chief Financial Officer,

Lisa Saxton, Director, Office of Racing,

Marnie Williams, Chief Executive Officer, Victims of Crime Financial Assistance Scheme,

Sonia Meloni, Chief Executive Officer, Community Safety Building Authority,

Tim Wiebusch, Commissioner, Emergency Management,

Jenni Rigby, Chief Executive Officer, Emergency Management Victoria, and

Mariela Diaz, Chief Executive Officer, Emergency Recovery Victoria, Department of Justice and Community Safety; and

Mike Bush, Chief Commissioner of Police, and

Michael Crevola, Chief Financial Officer, Victoria Police.

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

I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional Aboriginal owners of the land on which we are meeting today, and 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 2024–25 Financial and Performance Outcomes. Its aim is to gauge what the government, the courts and Parliament achieved in 2024–25 compared to what they planned to achieve.

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

All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard, and it is broadcast live on the Parliament's website. The broadcast includes 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.

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

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

I welcome the Secretary of the Department of Justice and Community Safety Ms Emma Cassar – welcome – as well as the Chief Commissioner of Victoria Police Mr Mike Bush. You are very much welcome, as well as other officials that have joined you here today. Secretary, I invite you to make an opening statement or presentation of no more than 10 minutes, after which time committee members will ask you some questions. Your time starts now.

Emma CASSAR: Thank you, Chair, and good morning, everyone. Over 2024–25 the department has worked to deliver several government priorities while also fulfilling statutory, contractual and operational functions.

Visual presentation.

Emma CASSAR: This year the department's focus has been on delivering quality frontline services and a policy, legislation and reform agenda that tackles emerging challenges in community safety, justice and emergency management. Our emphasis on system stewardship, managing risk, providing evidence-based practice and delivering quality frontline services ensures we remain well positioned to navigate a complex and dynamic operating environment.

In 2024–25 the total output cost for the portfolio was \$10.9 billion, including \$4.6 billion for Victoria Police. This supported service delivery across the portfolio and includes over 11,000 full-time equivalent staff within the department, more than 21,000 full-time equivalent staff at Victoria Police and grants to support emergency services, organisational staff, firefighters and our volunteers. DJCS has completed eight capital initiatives with a total value of over \$110 million.

The department is committed to our vision of a just, safe and resilient Victoria. Our vision has been achieved by fulfilling the core responsibilities in the justice portfolio, including first law officer functions and delivery of the state's adult corrections, youth justice and emergency management systems. Significant law reform has also been undertaken. Delivering these responsibilities required an extraordinary level of work involving development and implementation of laws, regulations, policies and service delivery. We thank our workforce, our emergency service partners and our incredible volunteers for their dedication.

Over 2024–25 the department delivered a suite of reforms to strengthen community safety, including passing the first tranche of the new bail laws to prioritise community safety and target repeat high-harm offending. A second tranche of bail laws were also developed by the department and introduced to Parliament in the second half of 2025. In response to the anticipated impact of community safety reforms the department, Victoria Police and courts commenced system-readiness work, including increasing the capacity of adult corrections and youth justice systems. We introduced a new performance crime offence to criminalise offenders posting and boasting about certain serious offences. We also strengthened our anti-vilification and social cohesion laws to provide more Victorians with protection against hate speech. New laws were passed to enhance Victoria Police powers to respond to organised crime, and new laws protecting customer-facing retail workers were also introduced recently.

Improving justice outcomes for Aboriginal people remains a key priority for the department. The Aboriginal justice agreement, a 25-year formal partnership with the Victorian Aboriginal community, continues to be the key strategy for reducing Aboriginal over-representation in the justice system. In 2024–25 the Aboriginal grants program delivered more than \$46.54 million in grant funding, which enabled over 100 community led-initiatives to improve Aboriginal justice outcomes. Ninety-six per cent of the grant funding was allocated to Aboriginal community organisations. The Aboriginal community grants program recognises that Victorian Aboriginal communities are best placed to design and deliver initiatives that are effective for Victorian

Aboriginal people. We continue to administer the stolen generations reparations package, which seeks to address the lasting social, emotional and economic impacts caused by the forced removal of Aboriginal children. In the last financial year the scheme received more than 992 applications and paid \$68.04 million in reparations to 683 applicants.

In emergency management, the State Control Centre was activated above monitoring level for 237 days in 2024–25, including for bushfire response, storm readiness and response, elevated heatwave conditions, elevated fire danger, elevated thunderstorm asthma forecasts and deployments into and out of Victoria. Emergency Recovery Victoria continued to coordinate the relief and recovery response to the October 2022 floods, administering 647 claims for assistance to individuals and emergency works under the Commonwealth's disaster recovery funding arrangements and 182 certified estimates for councils for the reconstruction of essential public assets. The Community Safety Building Authority completed and commissioned three new Country Fire Authority stations at Beaufort, Irymple and Pyalong. The department also successfully delivered a proof of concept to provide seamless communications for emergency services personnel responding to emergencies across state borders.

In the corrections portfolio, the department continued optimising the men's prison network, including the closure of Dhurringile Prison, opening Western Plains Correctional Centre and preparing for the end of the G4S contract to operate Port Phillip Prison. Victoria's recidivism rate is the lowest recorded since 2016–17 and below the national average. Several strategies and frameworks were launched to deliver safer prisons and communities, including the Correctional Practice Framework, the Corrections Victoria workforce strategy and the safer prisons strategy, which seeks to address occupational violence in prisons. In September 2024 the International Corrections and Prisons Association awarded Corrections Victoria with a Reducing Reoffending Award for the inside-to-outside jobs strategy.

In youth justice, the *Youth Justice Act 2024* received royal assent. The Act will provide a nation-leading legislative framework with a full spectrum of responses. Many of these reforms have already commenced, including the *Bail Act* amendments, raising the minimum age of criminal responsibility and an electronic monitoring and enhanced bail supervision and support trial. The two-year metropolitan-based trial enhances youth justice capacity to monitor and support young people on bail. It has been implemented alongside intensive bail supervision. In partnership with the community we also rolled out an Aboriginal family centred service aimed at keeping children under the age of 14 out of the justice system. The South Sudanese Australian Youth Justice Expert Working Group continued its vital work in understanding and addressing the drivers of South Sudanese Australian young people's justice involvement, and we will continue that work. To further support bail reforms and in response to young people involved in serious repeat offending the government established the Council on Bail, Rehabilitation and Accountability.

The launch of the Victims of Crime Financial Assistance Scheme on 18 November 2024 marked a significant milestone in reforming support for victims of violent crime in Victoria. The scheme replaced the Victims of Crime Assistance Tribunal with a simpler, more accessible, trauma-informed process. The scheme operates as an administrative scheme, moving away from previous court-based models to remove the need for victims to attend court. The scheme offers broader eligibility criteria, ensuring more victims can access support. The youth crime prevention program supports young people aged 10 to 24 at risk of involvement or previous involvement with the justice system through intensive case monitoring, mentoring and social activities. In June 2025 we established a new crime prevention program in Mildura. Sunraysia Community Health Services is working with local partners including Hands Up Mallee and the yarning group to ensure programs are aligned with community need and are culturally safe.

Jade BENHAM: And they're doing a terrific job.

Emma CASSAR: Thank you so much. We know that youth crime prevention program works to reduce reoffending, and the program has supported more than 7500 people, giving them the tools and connections to prevent offending.

In police and road safety new amendments were introduced to increase the police abilities to search people for weapons in public places – the machete ban and safe disposal scheme also reducing the number of weapons on Victorian streets and deterring their use in violent crimes. The department has also made changes so that more Victorian vulnerable to violent extremism are eligible for early intervention programs. Road safety continues to

be an ongoing issue in Victoria, with 296 lives lost to our roads in 2024–25. Road safety cameras remain a proven measure to reduce dangerous driving. All 35 new fixed road safety camera sites funded under the road safety action plan phase 1 are now operational and enforcing, with new point-to-point networks under construction.

In the racing portfolio the department continued to implement and back in jobs in the Victorian racing initiative to deliver a world-class racing infrastructure, events and regional customer facilities. The department facilitated the delivery of a 10-year funding agreement within the Victorian racing industry, totalling \$900 million across 10 years.

The tobacco business licensing scheme will ensure that only suitable applicants are granted licences to sell tobacco products and will protect legitimate businesses from illegal tobacco sales. Licensing enforcement officers will be on the ground from 1 February 2026 to ensure these premises are complying with the scheme and heavy penalties for those acting illegally.

We have been exceptionally busy supporting government to deliver an extensive legislative program to enhance community safety. Our law reform work is achieved through close consultation with the community and Aboriginal and justice stakeholders, who we thank for their engagement.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Secretary. The first set of questions are going to go to the Deputy Chair.

Roma BRITNELL: Good morning and thank you for that presentation. My first question is from budget paper 3, page 158. Can you please tell me how much the Victoria Police operating budget is in deficit?

Mike BUSH: Thank you. For that financial year it was in deficit, as recorded, by \$35.5 million against budget. I can add to that; in the main that relates to personnel expenses, some of which relate to the increased cost of long service leave and other impacts, including our employment bargaining agreement, which had some impacts on that also.

Roma BRITNELL: Thank you. As of 30 June 2025, how many police officer vacancies does Victoria have, and is that trending upwards?

Mike BUSH: That is remaining quite static. It is about 1100 short of the 17,000. Our attrition rate is at 5.4 per cent, which is a little bit above healthy. We are doing everything we can to address that. Our recruitment is going well at the moment, and we do have plans on how to address that. That was not the question, but I am happy to answer that also.

Roma BRITNELL: Thank you. At PAEC this year the acting chief commissioner, Bob Hill, said:

... by the latest estimations that have been provisioned to me it is anything between three to five years ...

From your own police gazette, there has been a net loss of 227 officers from January to November 2025. Do you still maintain that it is possible to be at full strength in five years?

Mike BUSH: It is possible to do it in less than five years. What our current plan is to have what we call double squads. One squad exists with about 22 officers. At the current application rate – and last week it was 173; the week before that we had 190-odd apply – we are averaging quite well. If you average it out at about 170, we have a succession rate throughput of 13 per cent. So, 13 per cent of the people who apply are successful in graduation. If you use those numbers, that is about 22 per week. On that number we can successfully have double squads, and that would ensure that if we maintain double squads for three years, we could address that shortfall.

Roma BRITNELL: Okay. Given that the police budget, though, is in deficit, how are you intending to fund the – is it 1400 or 1100 – shortfall in the police officers that you have got at the moment?

Mike BUSH: Well, we are currently funded for the full 17,000. Unfortunately we have been using some of that funding for other personnel expenses, so there are conversations that we need to have in terms of that.

Roma BRITNELL: So you do not have a plan right now to be able to fund those with the current budget because of the deficit?

Mike BUSH: We have a number of recommendations, yes, which we will work through. That is active.

Roma BRITNELL: Can you give us a copy of those recommendations so we can understand where the discussions are at?

Mike BUSH: No, they are conversations at the moment.

Roma BRITNELL: Okay. Under the keeping communities safe initiative in 2024–25, \$13 million has been invested in the rollout of machete bins. How many items have been surrendered through these bins?

Mike BUSH: I do have the number. We are not maintaining that system, but I think it is at about 6900. I stand to be corrected by my justice colleagues.

Roma BRITNELL: Can you clarify how many of those have been surrendered by retailers?

Mike BUSH: The 6900 are through the machete bins. There are a further at least 5000 through retailers. And there are, in the calendar year, in excess of 15,000 edged weapons seized by police – as of a week ago, 15,100. So if you add those up, we are in excess of –

Roma BRITNELL: So these are not items, these are –

Mike BUSH: These are items. They are either machetes, knives – edged weapons overall.

Roma BRITNELL: Can you give us a breakdown of the items so that we can see how many are machetes and how many are different things? That might even be rubbish, from what we are being told, that has been put in the bins.

Bill KYRIAKOPOULOS: I actually have more recent figures, Chief, if that is okay. I have got figures from 18 November. At that point we had around 14,000 knives that had been surrendered by the public and major retailers. It is over about 3000, close to 4000, from retailers to date, and that moves around a little bit. The last couple of weeks we have been getting over a thousand machetes into these bins.

Roma BRITNELL: Would you be able to provide those numbers with the breakdowns? That is the question.

Bill KYRIAKOPOULOS: The scheme will be closing shortly, and I believe all those details will be made available at the appropriate time.

Roma BRITNELL: But can you supply them to the committee?

Bill KYRIAKOPOULOS: Once the scheme is closed, my understanding is they will be made public.

Michael Galea interjected.

Roma BRITNELL: 2024–25.

Michael Galea interjected.

Roma BRITNELL: No, the planning took place in the last financial year.

Michael Galea interjected.

The CHAIR: Excuse me, members, I just want to clarify those numbers that the Deputy Chair is requesting will be publicly available on Sunday?

Bill KYRIAKOPOULOS: Whether it is on Sunday or not, we will obviously have to do our counting and close it out.

Roma BRITNELL: And what will happen to the trial after that? Will the bins just be turned into rubbish bins in front of the police offices? What will happen?

Bill KYRIAKOPOULOS: No, they certainly will not be turned into rubbish bins. They will be recycled, like the knives are being recycled, through the proper destruction process.

Roma BRITNELL: So the bins will be removed and it will all go in recycling and –

Bill KYRIAKOPOULOS: They will be removed over the course –

Roma BRITNELL: What a great use of taxpayer dollars that is! Thirteen million, and now they are going to be pulled down from in front of police stations and thrown in the recycling bin.

Michael GALEA: Point of order.

Roma BRITNELL: I will move on, it is fine.

The CHAIR: No, Deputy Chair, a point of order has been raised.

Michael GALEA: Witnesses have been very good to answer the questions regardless, but Ms Britnell well knows that this is well outside the scope of the 2024–25 period which this inquiry is looking at. The program ending in November 2025 does not count towards this financial year.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Galea. I rule on the point of order, Deputy Chair. Please keep your questions within the terms of reference of this inquiry. Do you have another question you wish to proceed with?

Roma BRITNELL: I was responding to what you said. I move on to bail reforms and prison capacity. There were several changes to bail over the financial year of 2024–25, as the Secretary noted in her presentation. Has the department undertaken any modelling on prison bed capacity and the possibility for the need to reopen Port Phillip Prison?

Emma CASSAR: Thank you for your question. I will start and then perhaps throw to others to provide more information. As with all complex policy and reforms, there has been an iterative process about providing advice to the Attorney-General and other justice portfolio ministers on many aspects of bail reform, including the modelling and the impacts on the system and service demand. Are you more interested in the impacts? How can we assist?

Roma BRITNELL: I am interested in whether there will be enough beds to handle the capacity, because obviously you have said before that recidivism has gone down, which I think the Victorian public will find very, very hard to understand given that there has been more and more crime on our streets. But maybe that is because more people are on bail or in remand and not in those statistics, which might be convenient. But the reality is the community are very, very anxious about their safety at the moment and frightened in their own homes. So can you tell me, will there be enough bed capacity, or will you have to open Port Phillip? And has there been modelling done on that?

Mathew HILAKARI: In relation to 2024–25? Is that the question?

Roma BRITNELL: The bail laws were done, changes, during 2024–25, and you would hope that the Victorian government would be planning for making sure those changes have the ability to house the people who are put in prison.

Jade BENHAM: And these questions are also part of the output summary.

Roma BRITNELL: Yes, thank you. Does that help clarify?

Emma CASSAR: It does. Thank you, Deputy Chair. So yes, the system is always planning and prepared to pivot to necessary changes like bail reform, but I will throw to the Commissioner, who can talk to certainly the adult system, and then we can bring the Youth Justice Commissioner as well.

Larissa STRONG: Thank you for the question. Yes, we are increasing our bed capacity across the prison system, the adult prison system, in response to bail reform. Since March this year, when bail reform was announced, we have opened 1159 prison beds across the system. We are at the same time also closing Port Phillip Prison, so our net increase in beds has been 392, but we have more beds opening, with 296 opening

from December and a further 452 opening in early 2026, which, based on our understanding, will be sufficient for bail reform, both bail reform tranches 1 and 2.

Roma BRITNELL: So with those figures, will Port Phillip need to reopen?

Larissa STRONG: No, that does not include Port Phillip Prison capacity.

Roma BRITNELL: So Port Phillip will not be opening?

Larissa STRONG: There are 20 health beds, 20 subacute health beds, at Port Phillip Prison in the St Johns ward that St Vincent's Hospital provide the health care for. They will stay open. CV will do the custodial component, but they are the only beds at Port Phillip Prison. That is in those figures.

Roma BRITNELL: Okay. Can I just go back to the question I was asking before about the deficit in police numbers. The 200 reservists – that is, the 200 persons or 200 full-time equivalent that you are putting in place to do the policing that is needed. How did you arrive at the figure of 200 reservists as being needed?

Mike BUSH: That is a pilot. It is very much how we free up staff from backroom roles. We have many staff, for example, personelling our public counters and other areas, jobs that can be done equally well by reservists, and that would then free up 200 officers so that they can be on the streets responding to crime, preventing crime. So it is very much a pilot first step in this process.

Roma BRITNELL: How did you arrive at that number 200?

Mike BUSH: That was what we thought was a fair number in terms of trialling the initiative so that we could prove the benefits. Any number less would perhaps not prove the benefits.

Roma BRITNELL: And what is the cost of that? Is that a cheaper way of filling the roles that you have used –

Mike BUSH: It is more economical than having fully trained, fully sworn staff. The reservists are what we will call on –

Roma BRITNELL: So what is that? Sorry. What cost have you for that trial?

Mike BUSH: I think we have costed them up at about \$80,000. I stand to be corrected, and my CFO is here, but around \$80,000 per person.

Roma BRITNELL: That is their total cost, and multiply by 200? Okay.

Mike BUSH: That is approximate.

Roma BRITNELL: All right, I will move on. I refer to pages 149 and 150 of the Department of Justice and Community Safety questionnaire. Fire Rescue Victoria says that they are using a redundancy system for MMR network or FRV portable radio faults. Do you know what the back-up systems are and if they have been trialled?

Emma CASSAR: Thank you for the question. I will ask Kate Fitzgerald to take that.

Kate FITZGERALD: Yes, thank you. In relation to FRV's ICT investment, there has been investment made within FRV's radio network, and the department of justice continues to work closely with FRV in relation to that. I might just get you to refer again to the specific reference in the budget papers, if I can.

Roma BRITNELL: Pages 149 and 150 of the questionnaire. It is about the radios that have faults, and we want to know if you have got a back-up system and if they have been trialled.

Kate FITZGERALD: 149? Is that the page number or the PDF number?

Roma BRITNELL: That is the page number. This is a general question about the Fire Rescue Victoria worrying about these radios that have got faults. Can you tell me about whether systems have been trialled – the backups?

Kate FITZGERALD: I do not have that information available to me. Sorry, I am not able to locate –

Roma BRITNELL: You will be able to get that for me on notice?

Kate FITZGERALD: I am happy to take that question on notice. I am not able to locate that question within the questionnaire at the moment.

Roma BRITNELL: No worries. What is the long-term fix to these radio faults, and what is the timeline for its completion?

Kate FITZGERALD: Again, I will need to take that on notice.

Roma BRITNELL: Okay. So we do not know whether when the tunnel opens these faults will be able to be addressed and there will be safety issues already in place by the time the tunnel is opened?

Kate FITZGERALD: I am happy to answer questions in relation to the tunnel. I thought you were referring to a global issue in relation to FRV radios –

Roma BRITNELL: I am referring to the way that people need to have their safety protected, and the question is around those tools that they will use to protect their safety.

The CHAIR: Deputy Chair, there is some confusion about the page number. Are we able to clarify if it is 149 of the PDF?

Roma BRITNELL: Well, as has already been said, I do not have to provide the exact page number, but this is where it refers to the Simplex communications. It requires a line of sight. We are worried about the safety, but we can move on. Thank you.

Kate FITZGERALD: I would be surprised if that information is in the questionnaire at the moment, as those issues are in relation to the Metro Tunnel, which is an issue this financial year –

Roma BRITNELL: I am understanding the issue around the safety is not in the questionnaire, but the system is something that is in the questionnaire and I am concerned about the safety.

Kate FITZGERALD: I would –

Members interjecting.

Roma BRITNELL: Well, if you are not concerned about the safety of the community on the –

The CHAIR: Excuse me. Mr Galea, on a point of order.

Michael GALEA: This is not the first time that the Deputy Chair has grossly misrepresented the remarks of officials at the table, and I ask her to withdraw that last comment.

The CHAIR: On the point of order, I just want to remind all members: please do not put words into the mouths of witnesses. It is inappropriate.

Roma BRITNELL: Okay. I will move on to some questions on youth justice, if I may. Can you provide the number of children aged 10 to 12 and aged 13 to 17 who have been in the youth justice system in the 2024–25 period who are also in the child protection system, please?

Emma CASSAR: Thank you, Deputy Chair. We will invite the youth justice commissioner up to answer those questions.

Andrea DAVIDSON: Can I please just ask for the question to be repeated?

Roma BRITNELL: Yes. Can you provide the numbers of children between 10 to 12 and 13 to 17 who have been in the youth justice system in 2024–25 who are also in the child protection system?

Andrea DAVIDSON: I cannot go to that specific data, but I am happy to take that question on notice.

Roma BRITNELL: And provide that to the committee. Thank you. How many of the children year to date in residential care are also in the youth justice system and what is their age breakdown? I am happy if that is also able to be provided.

Emma CASSAR: Deputy Chair, that is a matter for DFFH. If you are talking residential –

Roma BRITNELL: This is about how many in the youth justice system and the age breakdown that are also in residential care, so that is also a matter I would have thought –

Emma CASSAR: Are you talking residential care as in a facility of justice or a residential care –

Roma BRITNELL: How many are also in the youth justice system – which I believe is today's questioning – and the age breakdown of those children who are also known in residential care.

Emma CASSAR: I do not think that we would have that data, but we can absolutely take that on notice and see if we can provide that.

Roma BRITNELL: You would hope that there would be a connection between understanding that children who are in the care of the state that are getting into trouble would be well known and well documented so that we could avoid that continuation down a terrible pathway that when you are in the state's care you should be protected from.

I will refer to page 166 of the Department of Justice and Community Safety annual report, which states there has been an evaluation of the electronic monitoring trial – youth justice. Can I have a copy of this evaluation and what are the key findings, please?

Andrea DAVIDSON: The trial is in process, so the evaluation is not yet completed because the trial is not yet completed. That is not a report that is available.

Roma BRITNELL: Okay. I might just go back to questions about local government integrity. Why has the Local Government Inspectorate failed to make public any of its investigations over the past six years and why has it not produced its last two annual reports?

Emma CASSAR: Thank you, Deputy Chair. We will just ask Kathryn Bannon to come up and to address that question.

Kathryn BANNON: Thank you for the question. With respect to the Local Government Inspectorate, there is not an obligation for them to table an annual report like IBAC and the Victorian Ombudsman or Integrity Oversight Victoria. They have recently updated their website with respect to some of their key data and accountable actions over the last period of time with respect to reports, but at this stage that is not something that –

Roma BRITNELL: Can you just confirm then if the minister or the staff in the ministerial office have had any involvement in the concealment of these reports, the last two?

Lauren KATHAGE: Concealment? She just said they do not have to be tabled.

Roma BRITNELL: Can you just confirm whether the minister has any involvement in those concealments, please?

Lauren KATHAGE: Concealment – what concealment?

Roma BRITNELL: Of the information that the public might be wanting to be well aware of.

The CHAIR: Deputy Chair, I do hope you are listening to the responses of witnesses. Do you want to rephrase your question?

Roma BRITNELL: I might just change then to: has the department filled the four local government inspectorate vacancies reported by the *Herald Sun* in July?

Kathryn BANNON: The Local Government Inspectorate has a chief municipal inspector role, Michael Stefanovic, which is the statutory role. With respect to the employment decisions of various roles within that organisation, we work with the chief municipal inspector. I would have to take that on notice with respect to the four roles specifically that were reported and see where in that process – I do not have that information.

Roma BRITNELL: That would be great. If you could take that on notice and present that to the committee, we would be very grateful. Were any contractors or staff let go by the Local Government Inspectorate in the 2024–25 period?

Kathryn BANNON: Again, I will take that on notice. I am aware, as an authorised office, there are obviously staff movements; people take up opportunities elsewhere and people come in to replace those roles. With respect to any clause 11 or redundancies, I will take that on notice, but I am aware there has been staff movement.

Roma BRITNELL: Thank you. If you could take that on notice, I would greatly appreciate that. Secretary, can you also, as you have done in past years, provide a breakdown to the committee of the CFA, FRV and SES fleets by type, pumper, tanker et cetera and vehicle ages? Is that possible, please?

Emma CASSAR: Yes, of course. Kate Fitzgerald can answer that.

Kate FITZGERALD: Yes. Thank you. We are comfortable to provide that detail on notice in relation to appliances across CFA, FRV and SES.

Roma BRITNELL: Thank you. How many CFA tankers are still in service that are single cab and require firefighters to ride on the outside of the truck? If you have not got that, that is okay to present –

Kate FITZGERALD: I do not have that detail in relation to that specific asset.

Roma BRITNELL: But you will provide that on notice?

Kate FITZGERALD: I can provide that on notice if we have that detail.

Roma BRITNELL: And can you provide a copy of the CFA and FRV chief officers' attestation in regard to the service being prepared for the 2024–25 fire season and then the same for the upcoming season?

Kate FITZGERALD: Well, those attestations were completed within the 2025–26 financial year for the upcoming high-risk weather season, as is our normal practice.

Roma BRITNELL: But the ones for 2024–25? I am just thinking it would be nice for the community, given the fire load, given the drought the community have suffered and the farmers have been going through so much. A bit of reassurance – providing that attestation would be fantastic.

Kate FITZGERALD: Ms Britnell, I am happy to invite the emergency management commissioner, who is here with us today, to outline the preparedness actions that have been undertaken.

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

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Chair. Good morning, Secretary, Chief Commissioner and officials. Thank you for joining us, and welcome to your first PAEC, Chief Commissioner.

Mike BUSH: Thank you.

Michael GALEA: Secretary, I would like to start with Triple Zero Victoria. Page 138 of the questionnaire talks about their response and response benchmarks. What has been done in this past financial year to ensure that they are meeting the rising demand for emergency services call-outs?

Emma CASSAR: Thank you very much for the question, Mr Galea. I will throw to Kate Fitzgerald to talk to that.

Kate FITZGERALD: Thank you for the question, Mr Galea. The department continues to actively support Triple Zero Victoria across a range of matters, including most notably the delivery of the next generation

computer-aided dispatch system, the CAD project, and TZV is responsible for the delivery of this project. Whilst the amount of funding committed to this project was not quantified in the 2024–25 budget papers that you have been referring to as it was commercial in confidence at this time, page 71 of the 2025–26 budget paper 4 now quantifies this significant commitment, confirming total government investment in the project of \$92.89 million, with an estimated completion date of June 2028. As this committee will recall, the computer-aided dispatch platform is Triple Zero Victoria's critical operational and technology platform that provides the core service delivery capability for call-taking and dispatch operations. The CAD platform supports call takers to process all incoming requests for assistance for both emergency and relevant non-emergency events. It also enables the dispatch of emergency and non-emergency services resources. It enables TZV to perform its critical operational communications functions. It is also the data source that enables TZV to record and share emergency incident information where required and permitted by legislation.

Funded in the 2023–24 state budget, the multiyear next-generation CAD project is replacing the current system to meet the needs of our emergency services. Next-gen CAD will provide Triple Zero Victoria with a contemporary, integrated and connected technology platform that delivers significant benefits to the emergency management sector, Victorian government and the Victorian community. Triple Zero Victoria is leveraging cutting-edge technology to undertake the most critical and largest system build in the history of Victoria's emergency call-taking and dispatch services. It will provide a new enhanced, reliable and secure platform to support enhanced critical emergency services, 000 call taking and dispatch capability. It will enhance decision-making and productivity for call takers and dispatchers by delivering a more cohesive system integration and facilitating improved information exchanges between agencies. Next-gen CAD will be built on modern architecture that embeds security by design and has the capability to continuously improve as cyber responses and controls evolve. The highly configurable contemporary system will include multiple layers of redundancy solution and failover, vastly improving reliability. With improved intelligence sharing for decision-making, the new system will enable more efficient communication and teamwork between TZV and its agency partners. Its enhanced user interfaces will improve workflows for call takers and dispatchers and improve the overall operator experience. Additional functionality to display real-time geospatial call data information will facilitate better multi-agency response coordination. Dispatchers will be able to select appropriate equipment for specific incidents, and first responders will have a more detailed understanding of the incident environment prior to arrival.

This vital project, currently underway, will serve the Victorian community and emergency management sector for decades to come. Delivery of this project involves a complex system integration, program delivery, transition from the current system and infrastructure training and development for frontline computer-aided dispatch operators. By way of an update, the project has completed phase 1, which included completion of a comprehensive market approach, engagement of a strategic partner and completion of a competitive proof-of-concept process in consultation with partner agencies to select the preferred solution. Triple Zero Victoria have now brought on board a consortium of Hexagon and Fujitsu to implement and configure the CAD platform. A key part of the department's involvement has been providing specialist technical, project and financial assurance to identify and work through any potential risks to the extensive program of work Triple Zero Victoria is undertaking. Through this collaborative approach we are supporting the program to stay on track within the agreed schedule. The state government has also released funding from the emergency management operational communications trust to support TZV's operational communication team over this important period.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Ms Fitzgerald, and for your elaboration on the new CAD program too, which will be very, very good to see. As you would be aware, in the financial year, in November 2024, there was an outage at the TZV centre in East Burwood. What confidence can the community have in the contingency planning that TZV does to ensure that when such an outage occurs, as any system does from time to time, their calls will be responded to?

Kate FITZGERALD: Thank you. As you are aware, at approximately 12:31 am on 15 October 2025 Triple Zero Victoria experienced a disruption where the computer-aided dispatch system was temporarily unavailable. This led to all three state emergency communications centres enacting standard business continuity arrangements. The disruption was due to a power issue that initially impacted TZV's Tally Ho site, although operational impacts were experienced across all three state emergency communications centres. Full normal operations resumed approximately 4 hours later at 0411 hours on 15 October 2025. The time to recover normal operations was approximately 222 minutes.

TZV staff are highly trained in Victoria's call taking and dispatch backup procedures, which are consistent with all other Australian jurisdictions. TZV continuity arrangement activities include process workarounds, backup manual processes and emergency management plan activations. Triple Zero Victoria is conducting a full investigation into the cause of the disruption and the impacts on call taking and dispatch performance, including external vendors and subject matter experts.

Triple Zero Victoria's CAD and associated systems have remained stable since the disruption was resolved. No notifiable adverse events arising from this incident have been identified. All 000 calls were answered, noting some were via callbacks as part of the national 000 continuity processes. Ambulance performance was reduced for approximately 3 hours, with longer handling times and lower service levels. Police performance reduced during the disruption but recovered within 90 minutes. Fire was not materially affected due to low call demand, and dispatch operations relied on manual processes until CAD was restored.

Triple Zero Victoria has commenced a series of formal review activities into the disruption, which will seek to understand the causal factors, reflect on TZV's response and recovery to the incident and identify opportunities for future preparedness. This includes technical investigations led by Triple Zero Victoria regarding the power disruption and impact on critical information communications technology – ICT – services, which will involve vendors as required. Preliminary investigations indicate that a disruption to electricity supply impacting the Tally Ho State Emergency Communication Centre caused power fluctuation and a loss of approximately 5 seconds and caused the disruption to CAD.

Operational activity and emergency activations over recent years have stretched the capacity of the CAD system, but through proactive system monitoring and management of the system potential impacts are being monitored and mitigated. Triple Zero Victoria, along with other emergency services, has been preparing and planning for potential impacts of the upcoming extreme weather season. Triple Zero's preliminary understanding is that the 15 October incident is not related to the November 2024 incident as power was not disrupted through the November 2024 incident. Thank you.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. So the review is not into the 24 November incidents in relation to the more recent ones, is that correct?

Kate FITZGERALD: That is correct.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. When will that review be finalised?

Kate FITZGERALD: Normally those reviews take a period of three to four months following an incident for the agency to undertake comprehensive analysis into both the cause and the impact of the event.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. Page 84 of the department's annual report talks to grant expenses, which shows that for TZV there was slightly less in grant expenses in 2025 compared to 2024. Can you talk me through that, please?

Kate FITZGERALD: Yes, I can. The difference in grant funding for TZV in 2024–25 largely reflects the transfer of the emergency services communications contracts to the Department of Justice and Community Safety in the 2023–24 financial year. As part of the substantial review and program of investment that the Victorian government made into Triple Zero Victoria, including the commissioning of the inspector-general report into the previous ESTA and also Graham Ashton's report into ESTA at that stage, part of the recommendations from those reviews was that the current set of managed services that ESTA was managing on behalf of emergency services agencies should be transferred to the Department of Justice and Community Safety. That is a significant quantum of funding of around \$100 million or so, and those transfers have occurred in the 2023–24 financial year, representing a decrease in the grant funding that is provided to TZV as a result, with no change in the service delivery associated with the delivery of those contracts.

Michael GALEA: Thank you very much. This may be for you as well. I will put it to the Secretary in case it is a different area. Secretary, in budget paper 3, page 155, the emergency management capability output, the total output cost there I note was forecast at \$1.729 billion. Can you talk to me how this works in relation to funding for our emergency services – SES, CFA, FRV – and explain to me the model in which these agencies are funded and if their funding has been increased or decreased over this year?

Emma CASSAR: Certainly we can. I will throw to Kate again.

Kate FITZGERALD: Thanks. I can speak to the emergency management capability output, and then I will go to each of the emergency services agencies. As you may have noted, there is a variation in the output. The emergency management capability output cost for 2024–25 was \$2.307 billion, which was 33.4 per cent higher than the budgeted amount of \$1.729 billion. This variance is mainly driven by additional funding received by emergency services organisations throughout 2024–25, and there are a number of reasons for that. There was \$427.95 million released from central contingency to support the operations of Fire Rescue Victoria, Triple Zero Victoria, the Victorian State Emergency Service and the Country Fire Authority, and funding was also required for the emergency services agencies to commence specific industrial arrangements, operational arrangements, which included the commencement of supporting the CFA district mechanical officers and tower overseers enterprise agreement 2024 and the Triple Zero Victoria enterprise agreement, and also work to do in relation to the Fiskville off-site remediation and redress scheme development. There was \$20.36 million in supplementation for ESOs in the department to meet the unexpected and unforeseen additional costs associated with declared events through the 2024–25 financial year. There was \$8.67 million provided to support the Victorian State Emergency Service to meet the continued costs incurred in the rectification management of the heavy rescue trucks that were withdrawn from service and for operations for new and critical emergency services facilities. There was also \$1.37 million for discharging the remaining transferred COVID-19 Quarantine Victoria liabilities and duties and \$1.07 million to support ESO financial sustainability. There was also output appropriation carried over from 2023–24 into the 2024–25 financial year to support Victoria's flood recovery and additional cost contributions in relation to the emergency management operational communications program. As you can see, there is a lot of variability in that emergency management capability output year on year, and within the year as well, due to the dynamic nature of the emergency management portfolio within the department.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. Just to confirm: that means funding for all agencies was increased in that year?

Kate FITZGERALD: There has been no decrease in funding for the emergency services agencies. That is correct.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. Moving to CFA capital upgrades now – and I assume this might still be you, Ms Fitzgerald – this was an existing project outlined on page 93 of budget paper 4 in the 2024–25 budget. Especially with the very genuine and real concern of the upcoming fire season that we are faced with in Victoria this year, possibly the worst since Black Saturday, I just want to check in on this particular line item because it is very important of course that our CFA have the most up-to-date equipment that they can possibly have. On the spending in the 2024–25 financial year, can you talk to me about what was expended in the CFA capital upgrades program?

Kate FITZGERALD: Yes, I will commence, but I will ask my colleague Sonia Meloni, who is the CEO of the Community Safety Building Authority, to also join us at the table to be able to provide any further detail in relation to that. In relation to the achievements of the Community Safety Building Authority in the 2024–25 financial year, they undertook a range of activities across the emergency services portfolio. There was the completion and commissioning of three CFA fire stations at Beaufort, Irymple and Pyalong. There was completion and delivery – and although this is beyond CFA, I think it is important to outline the work of CSBA across all emergency services – of a new MSAR vessel for Queenscliff. There was execution of contracts to acquire land for CFA Kinglake West, VICSES at Bannockburn and VICSES at Kalkallo. There was also commenced and continued construction of CFA fire stations at Golden Square, Newborough, Metcalfe, Wyndham Vale and Serpentine, and a new emergency services hub at Mallacoota. Ms Meloni may have further detail in relation to the status of CFA projects across the state.

Sonia MELONI: Thank you for the question. As the deputy commissioner has explained, we have completed a number of stations over 2024–25. We have a number that are currently going through design and planning, including Kilmore, Bannockburn, Corio, Devon Meadows and Footscray – and for Life Saving Victoria we also have Wonthaggi, Williamstown, Sorrento, Point Lonsdale back beach and Port Melbourne – along with the hubs at Heathcote and Rochester. We are also continuing to design through Yarram, Raywood, Dartmoor, Clyde, Riddells Creek, Litchfield, Hoddles Creek, The Basin and Winnindoo, with a number of them currently out to tender. Hopefully, we will be appointing a successful builder over the coming months.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. I am sure all the members of the committee could give you a long list of additional ones we would love you to consider as well. On the CSBA actually, whilst you are here, I might further ask: what actions have you taken in the past 12 months, in the period, to improve the pipeline and improve the flow by which we are delivering these projects so that they can be done as efficiently as possible?

Sonia MELONI: We have undertaken quite a bit of work with the agencies in regard to their design and their design briefs and the scope of that, and so we have looked at working very closely with what we call the design authority, which incorporates the agencies as well as CSBA, and those are worked through the year to look at value management options as well as looking at meeting the operational requirements of that specific area. Those designs are worked through, and then the entities work very closely with their volunteers to ensure that it meets their requirements. That becomes our standing process moving forward to ensure that we are meeting the requirements of the community and of that particular unit or brigade.

Michael GALEA: Thank you very much, and thank you, Ms Fitzgerald. Returning, Secretary, to you again and page 25 of the questionnaire, what investments into bushfire recovery have gone into western Victoria in particular? I am curious to know what the government is doing to support bushfire-affected communities in the wake of bushfires in the financial year.

Emma CASSAR: Thank you for the question. I will ask Kate Fitzgerald to respond.

Kate FITZGERALD: Thank you. I will make some opening remarks, and then I will ask my colleague the CEO of Emergency Recovery Victoria, Ms Mariella Diaz, to also join me at the table to provide a bit more of the detail sitting in behind the important work that has been occurring after the western Victorian bushfires. The 2025–26 budget committed \$29.7 million in output funding and \$1.6 million in asset funding for 2024–25. That was for the department of environment, DJSIR and the Department of Transport and Planning to deliver recovery support. Some of this funding is subject to cost sharing with the Commonwealth under the disaster recovery funding arrangements, and Emergency Recovery Victoria has been leading the coordination of that recovery with those local communities and the relevant departments. I will ask Ms Diaz to step through a bit more of the detail in relation to some of those programs that we have been delivering there.

Mariela DIAZ: Thank you. Emergency Recovery Victoria has been working very closely with local government as well as communities to understand their recovery needs and to support them through building resilience and getting those communities on track. Also, we have been working very closely with our government colleagues at both DEECA and DJSIR to ensure that those needs are being met in a timely manner and that the rollout of those programs is done in a way that is consultative with communities. So, for example, for a lot of the work we have worked closely with Parks Victoria to ensure that the park is open as quickly as possible. It is very critical to the local economy, particularly of Halls Gap, to ensure that the services are open to the public. There have been a number of initiatives that have been rolled out, including getting publications out into the community to encourage visitation rates, and we have seen that increase significantly, particularly since April. That program of work continues into this summer and will continue into early next year. We have seen some success in being able to increase visitation numbers to the area, and Parks Victoria have worked very hard to make sure that the park is open for main events throughout November and early December this year. In relation to business support, we continue to work closely with DJSIR to ensure that the program that was made available for business support was accessible to those that needed it, but part of that is also increasing visitation. That was what we heard very clearly from local businesses and council: that it is important to get the park open to get visitor numbers up. As I said earlier, I think that that has been relatively successful for this year, so the investment has certainly paid off.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Ms Diaz.

The CHAIR: We are going to Ms Benham.

Jade BENHAM: Thank you, Chair. Good morning. I did want to compliment again the youth programs that are in Mildura – Sunraysia Community Health and Hands Up do an amazing job. I will come back to youth justice in a sec. These are questions for Ms Fitzgerald just on the ESOs. They go to your answer earlier but also the questionnaire on page 27, I think it is. There is \$1.07 million provided for a Treasurer’s advance to deliver the ESOs’, the emergency services organisations’, financial sustainability – for fixed-term staff to support ‘ESO financial sustainability’. Are they not financially sustainable in that they need a Treasurer’s advance?

Kate FITZGERALD: I can speak to the reference that you have made on page 27 of the PAEC questionnaire. This was funding that was provided to my team within the department of justice to really work very closely with the emergency services organisations to identify the cost drivers, including the demand that they are experiencing upon emergency services, to identify and ensure that they had the funding available to be able to meet their requirements. It looked at specific things such as fleet, facilities and so on, and making sure that the government was in the right position to be able to ensure –

Jade BENHAM: I am sorry, Ms Fitzgerald, but shouldn't that be part of the ESO's core functions that are funded from the allocated budget, not out of a Treasurer's advance?

Kate FITZGERALD: Well, we worked very closely with the emergency services agencies to undertake this work, and we had a committee that was established to do detailed work with the emergency services organisations to ensure that we were able to get the same level of information and data from all the emergency services agencies.

Jade BENHAM: So without that Treasurer's advance that work would not have been able to be completed?

Kate FITZGERALD: We would have had to offset it within my group, and that would have meant that I would have had to stop other key priorities within my group.

Jade BENHAM: So they are not sustainable? The ESOs are not sustainable?

Kate FITZGERALD: No, that is not what I said.

Jade BENHAM: Without a Treasurer's advance – that 1.07 – you would not have been able to complete the work and you would have had to cut services in other areas?

Kate FITZGERALD: No, that is not what the work was in relation to. The work was in relation to working very closely with the emergency services agencies to understand the cost drivers and demands upon their budgets and upon their workforces to better understand how the government could support their operations now and into the future. As you are aware, climate change is having a significant impact within the emergency services sector, and it is important that we continue to be able to meet the needs of the emergency services agencies as they are responding to those impacts of climate change.

Richard WELCH: May I ask: all of those things that you are describing, which sound very important, are they not core functions?

Kate FITZGERALD: They are core functions of the emergency services agencies.

Richard WELCH: Then why did they need an extra payment if they are a core function?

Kate FITZGERALD: Sorry, you will need to repeat that question, Mr Welch; I did not hear it.

Jade BENHAM: Can I ask: the fixed-term staff illustrated in the questionnaire – were they staff consultants or contractors?

Kate FITZGERALD: Staff.

Jade BENHAM: They are staff; they are not outside consultants.

Kate FITZGERALD: No.

Jade BENHAM: Okay. Thank you. Was any part of that spending used for developing the new Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund?

Kate FITZGERALD: No. That is a responsibility of the Department of Treasury and Finance.

Jade BENHAM: Thank you. I have a couple of questions now. I want to go back to the Chief Commissioner. Welcome. I want to talk about 2024–25, and this might be a question for the Secretary. What were the chief commissioner wages in 2024–25?

Lauren KATHAGE: Oh, jeez.

Jade BENHAM: So what was allocated to pay the chief commissioner wages in 2024–25? Given that Shane Patton was on the books until June and we had Nugent as an acting chief commissioner, were we paying three chief commissioners at the same time?

Emma CASSAR: Unless one of the team has that answer, I will have to take that one on notice.

Jade BENHAM: You will take that on notice. Thank you very much. Can I also ask about, in 2024–25, the air wing's contracted flying hours. Are they broken down per month or annually?

Mike BUSH: Both.

Jade BENHAM: Both. What are they annually?

Mike BUSH: I do not have the figure in front of me. I am happy to provide that on notice.

Jade BENHAM: And could you provide monthly as well?

Mike BUSH: Sure.

Jade BENHAM: Do you know the details of how many surplus contracted flying hours we end up with every month, and do they roll over?

Mike BUSH: We definitely have that data, yes.

Jade BENHAM: And you will supply that on notice?

Mike BUSH: Yes.

Jade BENHAM: Great. Thank you, Chief Commissioner. I want to talk about youth justice now. Can we talk about the stolen generations repatriation package, which is in the questionnaire on page 18, and the \$68.04 million. This package obviously addresses the suffering caused by the forced removal of Aboriginal children from their families. As of 30 June 2025 there were 992 applications received. Correct? Thank you. And that \$68.04 million in repatriation payments was made to 683 applicants?

Emma CASSAR: I believe that is correct, but I do have Adrian Sculthorpe here.

Jade BENHAM: That is right?

Adrian SCULTHORPE: That is correct, yes.

Jade BENHAM: Okay. So the others that have come in, are they later applications?

Adrian SCULTHORPE: Well, there is a range, but the majority of them, yes, are applications that are still being assessed going through the process. But of course some applications are rejected as well, so some would fall in that category.

Jade BENHAM: Okay. Can you run me through the methodology used to determine the package – how you break down the \$68.04 million – paid to those 683? Does that cover them all? Can you break down how that funding is allocated?

Adrian SCULTHORPE: I think I understand the question, but I am not sure. With funding that is available, the maximum amount that people can receive is \$100,000 –

Jade BENHAM: One hundred thousand dollars. Okay.

Adrian SCULTHORPE: as a reparation payment, if they receive the full package.

Jade BENHAM: Okay. So that package that went to those 683 applicants used up that entire funding package.

Adrian SCULTHORPE: That is not the entire amount of the package; that is the amount that has been paid out. That figure is the amount that has been paid out. It includes what I spoke about then. It also includes payments available to people that are critically ill, and I think that is a \$20,000 payment. That is why it does not add up to exactly 100,000 times the number of applicants.

Jade BENHAM: Yes, that is okay. We are just looking for an itemised list of what the payments are, what the circumstances are and if there are different payments for people whose circumstances might be different, remote –

Adrian SCULTHORPE: No.

Jade BENHAM: There are not?

Adrian SCULTHORPE: The people that are critically ill might get a \$20,000 advance payment. Then if you receive the full package, you receive \$100,000.

Jade BENHAM: Are you able to supply the details, the broken-down details, of how payments are received, just for the sake of transparency?

Adrian SCULTHORPE: Of how payments are received?

Jade BENHAM: Yes. If we could grab a year-by-year breakdown, that would be handy.

Adrian SCULTHORPE: Of the amount of money that has been paid out of the package each year? Yes.

Jade BENHAM: Thank you very much. This is the SES again. This is budget paper 3, page 158, and the Victorian SES annual report 2024–25, page 84. Secretary, the government has not been transparent – I am surprised – on what the base operational budgets are for our emergency services organisations. What was the budget breakdown for 2024–25, and what is the budget breakdown for the base funding for FRV, CFA, SES, Triple Zero, the state control –

The CHAIR: Excuse me, Ms Benham, there is point of order. Mr Hilakari.

Mathew HILAKARI: I am just trying to follow along with the references. I have got budget paper 3, page 158 –

Jade BENHAM: We are really playing hard defence today, aren't we?

The CHAIR: Excuse me. A point of order has been raised.

Mathew HILAKARI: Well, it is about public prosecution, and people should be able to follow along.

Roma Britnell interjected.

The CHAIR: Excuse me, Deputy Chair. You are wasting your own time. Mr Hilakari, make it quick, please.

Mathew HILAKARI: Certainly. I think it is rightful that people should be able to follow along, particularly the witnesses.

Jade BENHAM: Sure. Go to the Victorian SES annual report 2024–25, page 84.

The CHAIR: Excuse me, Ms Benham. I am going to rule on the point of order. Could you please provide proper references to witnesses before the committee. This is the second time I have asked those to my left to afford the courtesy to witnesses of providing them the correct page numbers.

Jade BENHAM: The third time is the charm, Chair. Victorian SES annual report 2024–25, page 84, as has been stated twice before. We are just trying to get to the actual base figure. We are having a lot of trouble finding what the base budget breakdowns are for our emergency services organisations. We want the emergency services to be funded properly. That is all we are looking for.

Emma CASSAR: Our emergency services organisations do a terrific job, but I will ask Kate Fitzgerald –

Jade BENHAM: They do. They are amazing. We are a big fan of them, and we want them to be funded properly, particularly the SES.

Kate FITZGERALD: Thank you, Secretary. I can speak to that. In 2024–25 VICSES received \$81.35 million in total state government grant funding via the department of justice.

Jade BENHAM: What about FRV, CFA and Triple Zero?

Kate FITZGERALD: I will go to each of those. In 2024–25 CFA received a total of \$352.6 million in grant funding via the department of justice. That information is available in the DJCS annual report. The CFA annual report is yet to be tabled.

Jade BENHAM: What about FRV?

Kate FITZGERALD: I will go to FRV. In the 2024–25 financial year FRV received a total of \$1.13 billion in state government grant funding via the department of justice, and that information is available in the DJCS annual report. The FRV annual report is yet to be tabled.

Jade BENHAM: What about Triple Zero?

Kate FITZGERALD: In 2024–25 Triple Zero Victoria received \$225.2 million in grant funding via the department of justice.

Jade BENHAM: The SES annual report, which was tabled last week and is our reference point, showed that operating grant income fell from \$75 million to \$65 million. Why? But you have just given us another total of \$81.3 million.

Kate FITZGERALD: The reduction in grant funding to VICSES for those financial years is largely attributed to fixed-term additional initiative funding in 2023–24 that subsequently lapsed and VICSES requiring less budget supplementation funding in 2024–25 as reimbursement for costs incurred as a result of responding to all-weather emergency events. As I outlined previously, the final allocation of budgets provided to the emergency services organisations are finalised in June of the financial year, and they can be quite dynamic year on year due to the need for supplementation for issues and also a further supplementation associated with the response to emergency events and whether there is any additional initiative funding that is provided through the state budget.

Jade BENHAM: Okay. Are you able to provide those breakdowns and also what the 2024–25 base funding is on notice for us? I understand they may be hard figures to come up with.

Kate FITZGERALD: The 2024–25 funding allocated from the department of justice to each of the emergency services organisations is available through the DJCS annual report, but I am happy to take that question on notice.

Jade BENHAM: Interesting that the minister will not answer it during question time, but okay. I want to move on to the financial waste and decision-making behind the closure and reopening of the Malmsbury Youth Justice Centre. The government has allocated \$141 million over five years to reopen and operate Malmsbury. How does this compare to the projected cost of keeping Malmsbury open right the way through, from 2020 through to 2026, under a maintenance or a limited operation model?

Emma CASSAR: As you would appreciate – and thank you for the question – we are constantly reviewing our operational plans to ensure that we deliver exceptional and safe operations, and from time to time that means the closure of facilities. Then should policy change –

Jade BENHAM: I was going to say government policy changes.

Emma CASSAR: or requirements change, we might need to reconsider those options. But I will throw to the Commissioner of Youth Justice to answer that question.

Andrea DAVIDSON: Thank you, Secretary. Since Malmsbury was closed on 31 December 2023, \$14.72 million has been spent on the decommissioning and holding costs. That is the response I have to that question, noting that it is across that full period of time.

Jade BENHAM: What would the operating costs of a limited operation model have been during the three years it was closed? If it was \$14.72 million to close it, what would the operating costs have been?

Andrea DAVIDSON: That is a question I would have to take on notice.

Jade BENHAM: Great. Thank you very much. I want to talk about the harness racing industry very briefly. This is a vital question, and there is only one. It is not a hard one, but the future of the harness racing industry in this state is depending on the answer to this. Harness Racing Victoria is highly dependent on being the recipient of proceeds from the sale of the balance of land from Melton park after it has repaid the government what it owes. However, there is a requirement for all land sold to be returned to general revenue. The industry is seeking an exemption from this to ensure its survival. Can you advise if that exemption has been granted to allow the balance of funds to be received by HRV?

The CHAIR: Ms Benham, did you just want to direct it within the –

Jade BENHAM: Sure. Budget paper 3, page 160 of the 2024–25 budget. It is the sale of Melton park. It has been going on for years.

Bill KYRIAKOPOULOS: There are ongoing discussions with government and HRV. The matters around the disposal of land and so on are with the Department of Treasury and Finance and then the department – it is DTP, Department of Transport and Planning.

Jade BENHAM: With the Department of Transport and Planning? That is interesting. So you cannot advise whether that exemption has been granted or whether it is likely to be granted?

Bill KYRIAKOPOULOS: No, I cannot speculate, sorry.

Jade BENHAM: What about the sustainability of Harness Racing Victoria? Is that a concern within the department?

Bill KYRIAKOPOULOS: HRV continues to operate in a pretty complex environment. Revenue is down in the racing industry, and the department and the government have been working very closely with HRV on its finances, including providing uplift funding where required for financial purposes.

Jade BENHAM: Will the department make recommendations to the minister to help support the harness racing industry?

Bill KYRIAKOPOULOS: There have been a number of decisions taken already. In 2024–25 the government provided HRV with \$13.38 million in an operating grant for insolvency and the implementation of its restructuring strategy, which is still playing out.

Jade BENHAM: Great. Is there any advice of those briefings that we are able to receive on notice?

Bill KYRIAKOPOULOS: Sorry, which briefings are you referring to?

Jade BENHAM: The advice that the department may have offered as far as –

Bill KYRIAKOPOULOS: I would have to take that on notice.

Jade BENHAM: Yes, thank you. I have some more questions around the Aboriginal youth cautioning program. The police annual report 2024–25 mentions the programs and the outcomes, but it does not publish the full review report. Why has the operational review of the AYCP not been publicly available? And is there a commitment to releasing that information?

Mike BUSH: I do not have the answer to that – I am very happy to take it on notice – other than to say that it is very successful and it is growing. I cannot see a reason not to.

Jade BENHAM: Great. I think the data would be very, very handy for those that are working into the future.

Mike BUSH: I am reliably informed by all parties that it is running well, it is successful and we are looking at ways of enhancing it.

Jade BENHAM: Great. If we could get a copy of that review, it would be great. So you are not aware of any specific operational issues that were identified in the review?

Mike BUSH: No.

Jade BENHAM: Or what actions need to be taken?

Mike BUSH: No.

Jade BENHAM: None have been raised? Excellent.

Mike BUSH: None to my knowledge.

Jade BENHAM: None to your knowledge. Thank you.

Mike BUSH: All the feedback I have had is very positive.

Jade BENHAM: Excellent, thank you. The *Wirkara Kulpa* performance framework development – this is regarding page 118 of the questionnaire. Why has the *Wirkara Kulpa* performance framework not been made publicly available, and what is the timeline for that release?

Andrea DAVIDSON: Thank you for the question about *Wirkara Kulpa*, our Aboriginal youth justice strategy. The performance framework associated with that strategy has recently been developed and is also still being developed across the full phase. I think it is really important to acknowledge that the Aboriginal youth justice strategy is a 10-year strategy, so it is obviously a very longitudinal piece. Work was engaged immediately with our Aboriginal Justice Caucus stakeholders and the broader Aboriginal justice landscape. Part of that initial work was the co-design and the input into the evaluation framework, so really understanding what it is to actually implement the different elements of *Wirkara Kulpa*. The actual implementation itself is occurring across four tranches, with all 75 actions commencing within the first six years of *Wirkara Kulpa*, so by 2027–28, and then the evaluation will follow after those.

Jade BENHAM: Okay. Will the performance framework be made publicly available so that we can see targets and things, or can you provide that on notice?

Andrea DAVIDSON: I can definitely provide that on notice.

Jade BENHAM: Great, thank you so much. One more question about the tobacco licensing scheme that DGS handballed to your department: the 14 inspectors, were they employed before 30 June?

Kathryn BANNON: No. The recruitment campaign for the inspectors commenced after 30 June. The focus was on –

The CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Kathage.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you so much, Chair, Secretary, Commissioner and officials. I want to ask about flood responses. I can see on page 96 of the questionnaire it talks about an increase in funding for a flood recovery initiative. What sort of works does that fund, what is still ongoing and what did that cover?

Kate FITZGERALD: Thank you. I am happy to speak to that initially, and I will also ask Ms Diaz to join me at the table to provide a bit more of the detail, Ms Kathage, in relation to some of the work that has been undergoing in relation to the flood recovery. There have been a range of major events within Victoria over the last couple of years where Emergency Recovery Victoria has worked closely with local communities in relation to the relief and recovery of those communities, importantly working with councils to ensure that they have access to the funding required. Over the last five years there has been \$3.6 billion in investment and that has included 279 recovery programs. 220 of those have now been completed and 59 remain active. Ms Diaz may

speak to some of the sort of key programs that we have delivered over the last couple of years, supporting communities in their flood recovery.

Mariela DIAZ: Thank you. The question relates to all flood recovery from October 22, is that correct? Yes. There are a number of very key initiatives in relation to those floods that were very important to the 69 councils that were impacted by that flood. Two of the most significant programs relate to temporary accommodation – there were over 4000 people that were impacted or their accommodation was impacted by that flood activity. At one point we had over 500 people that were accessing temporary accommodation that was supported by the state. That included things like temporary accommodation in hotels and motels, the Mickleham centre, or the national resilience centre, was also stood up. That had just shy of 300 people at its maximum stay throughout a three-month period of time. The recovery support program was absolutely critical in the one-on-one support that flood-impacted people required in order to access a range of services, which included financial counselling, financial support, assistance with insurance and assistance in firming up long-term accommodation. Our modular housing program that we also utilised during the 2019–20 bushfires, many of those modular homes were relocated to support local residents that were impacted. Our aim was to keep people within their local communities wherever possible, so we tried to keep people situated in the homes on their properties through the homes at home program, which made caravans available to people that were impacted and wanted to stay on their premises. That supported people to make sure they had access to be able to feed their animals and to stay close to schools and employment. That was our core principle throughout all of the recovery activity that was conducted in October 2022.

We also worked closely with local government and communities to identify core priorities. Housing was a key priority. There were significant issues across the state in being able to access rental and supporting renters. We also had a taskforce established that focused on all the coordination elements throughout government. The state recovery committee ran throughout that period of time. That ensured government departments were working hand in hand and efficiently so decisions were made quickly. We had key intelligence that was able to assist us to plan what those communities required through that time.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you. I like the sound of the flexibility of the support really based on a lot of community input as well. It is great to hear that it is not one size fits all or that there is no choice available.

Mariela DIAZ: The recovery support program has only recently finished, so they had quite a lengthy period of engagement directly and one-on-one support to help them throughout their rebuild journey.

Lauren KATHAGE: I guess some lessons were learned then for future flood events and other issues as they come, touch wood. I would like to talk about the ‘Supporting our emergency services and volunteers’ initiative. That is listed on page 140 of the *2024/25 Budget Update*. I am not really sure what sort of programs sit under that initiative. If you can talk us through those and what sort of outcomes we have seen in the reporting period.

Kate FITZGERALD: Thanks, Ms Kathage. I am happy to speak to that item. It primarily includes the volunteer emergency services equipment program, VESEP, of which the most recent funding was announced by the government yesterday.

Lauren KATHAGE: Just yesterday, yes – exciting.

Kate FITZGERALD: That was the 2025–26 VESEP round announced yesterday. As you may recall, late last year the Victorian government announced a doubling of the funding into VESEP for four years – that equates to \$62 million – commencing in 2025–26, with approximately \$15 million to be added to VESEP annually over each year for the next four years. This has enabled the department to allocate \$30.6 million in grants across the state through the 2025–26 VESEP round, compared with \$15.3 million in grants that were allocated through the 2024–25 VESEP round. Volunteers from the Country Fire Authority brigades; Victoria State Emergency Service, VICSES, units; Life Saving Victoria clubs; volunteer Marine Search and Rescue units; and other volunteer emergency services groups shared in these grants. VESEP provides funding to support purchases of operational equipment, vehicles and appliances and to undertake minor facility improvements. The 2025–26 round saw 102 grants provided to fund operational equipment, and I will provide some examples because I think it shows how they are directly benefiting local communities and local volunteers.

Lauren KATHAGE: I know a hose-drying tower in Doreen was well received. Thank you.

Kate FITZGERALD: Oh, that is good; I am pleased to hear that. Some examples of these include the following: Bungador, Everton, Karabeal and Nullawarre CFA brigades will receive over \$2000 each to purchase thermal imaging cameras; and in Boneo and Kadnook – and I apologise for my pronunciation of any local names; it is not my area of expertise being able to pronounce some of these names – those CFA brigades in those two communities will receive over \$1000 each to purchase a quick-fill trailer. Bannockburn VICSES unit will receive over \$5000 to purchase lighting kits. The Daylesford VICSES unit will receive over \$3000 to support the purchase of new and replacement headlamps for members; and the Mentone Life Saving Club will receive over \$20,000 to support the purchase of an inflatable rescue boat trailer and an inflatable rescue boat motor. The Wye River Surf Life Saving Club will receive over \$8000 to purchase an inflatable rescue boat motor along with life jackets, soft rescue boards and a fibreglass rescue board. Bush Search and Rescue Victoria will receive over \$4000 to support the purchase of clothing for its volunteers, including hi-vis jackets and shirts.

In addition, 141 grants have been provided to support the purchase and/or refurbishment of vehicles and appliances, which is a really important initiative for local brigades and units. This included Alexandra and Ocean Grove CFA brigades, which will each receive over \$69,000 for a breathing apparatus support vehicle. Boho, Carisbrook and Eldorado brigades are amongst the 12 brigades that will receive over \$145,000 each to purchase an ultralight tanker. Chelsea, Euroa, Fawkner and Melton VICSES units will each receive over \$95,000 to purchase a Ford Ranger vehicle. Footscray, Glen Eira and Healesville VICSES units will each receive over \$165,000 to support the purchase of light rescue vehicles. The Woolamai Beach Surf Life Saving Club –

Lauren KATHAGE: It is quite an extensive list then, so it is obvious that there is there is quite a bit that is going out in the VESEP grants, and that is under ‘Supporting our emergency services and volunteers’ initiatives. It is really great to hear that it is really getting to where people want it and that it is identified by the units themselves and what is needed by them. It is great that it is not just coming down from above. It really is great to hear about that.

In terms of the VicEmergency app, has there been funding or changes in 2024–25 in regard to changes to the app? Where is that sort of going?

Kate FITZGERALD: Yes, that is right. The Victorian government through the 2025–26 budget has invested a significant amount of funding in VicEmergency and the emergency management common operating picture, the EM-COP. That is the platform that sits behind the public-facing VicEmergency platform. It has a huge amount of data that feeds into that platform, which our emergency services use on a day-to-day basis to be able to ensure that they have got the right information, data and resources for their response operations. Importantly, in relation to VicEmergency that platform has been around for approximately 10 years now. It is an extremely well known and visible platform for Victorian communities, and it is important that we maintain the relevance and currency of that VicEmergency app. The investment that we will be making in VicEmergency is to ensure that it remains fit for purpose for Victorian communities; to make sure that they have got the information, warnings and advice in emergencies; and importantly, to ensure that communities such as CALD communities and those with a disability also have the ability to be able to access and use the app, understand it and take the appropriate actions as required.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you. I think probably every day over the summer I am looking and seeing, so thank you. I have been speaking with the Whittlesea CFA lately about their vehicles. I think all CFA brigades have their plans for the future with updating their trucks. Can you tell us a bit about the rolling fleet replacement program for CFA and SES and how getting those better appliances in is going to equip them, I guess, to then go on and support Victorians? How is that replacement fleet program going?

The CHAIR: Excuse me, Ms Kathage. Mr Welch would like to raise a point of order.

Richard WELCH: I am just wondering if this is regarding the 2024–25 year or if you are talking about the future?

Lauren KATHAGE: Yes.

The CHAIR: Excuse me, Ms Kathage. I will rule on the point of order, and I am very glad Mr Welch is listening. Ms Kathage, did you have something you can draw it back to the terms of reference with?

Lauren KATHAGE: Yes. I would like to draw your attention to page 35 of BP3 and ask how the replacement program improved appliances across the state in 2024–25 and how that went on to improve –

Jade BENHAM: What page?

Lauren KATHAGE: I said page 35 of BP3, and page 140 of the 2024–25 budget update. I could also give you a questionnaire reference if you like, but I would prefer to hear Ms Fitzgerald's answer about the impact of those appliances on improving bushfire safety in the 2024–25 year.

Kate FITZGERALD: Yes. Thank you, Ms Kathage. I am happy to speak to both the CFA rolling fleet program and also the VICSES rolling fleet investment that the government has made. I will just provide some context in relation to the overall fleet within CFA. As at 30 June 2025 CFA's fleet of firefighting appliances consisted of 2260 vehicles, including 1997 tankers, 219 pumpers and 44 pumper tankers. As at 30 September 2025 CFA has 49 new vehicles in the build stage, including 28 urban pumpers, one ultra-heavy tanker and 20 medium tankers. As you referenced, the 2024–25 budget provided \$16.75 million in asset funding and \$1.83 million in output funding over three years to replace 15 CFA urban pumpers. In addition, in December 2024 the state government announced \$70 million to establish a rolling fleet replacement program for the CFA and the Victorian State Emergency Service as part of the new Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund. In addition, the additional funding into the volunteer emergency services equipment program, VESEP, has allowed for local CFA brigades, as I outlined, to also be able to purchase appliances and operational equipment. In relation to the 2024–25 financial year, CFA received \$4.77 million in VESEP funding to support the purchase of appliances for CFA brigades, so that included 27 projects.

As you can see, there is investment both through the state budget, there is investment through the additional funding announced as part of a rolling fleet program and there is also additional funding going directly into brigades to be able to increase their purchase of local appliances. This significant investment over the last 12 months has allowed CFA to develop and improve its overall pipeline of appliances within the CFA, and it currently has a 10-year whole-of-asset plan in relation to fleet replacement, renewal and maintenance requirements. The additional investment has allowed CFA to review and significantly invest in new appliances for the CFA.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you. We are looking forward to more dual cabs coming out as well to enable more officers to get to the fire front. On to the VICSES and the heavy rescue trucks which are detailed on page 54 of the questionnaire – the development of the new trucks: how were the SES involved in the design process in what they would look like, the ones produced in 2024–25? What role did the volunteer working group have in that?

Kate FITZGERALD: As part of that investment in SES's heavy rescue truck replacement program, VICSES led this work, obviously, working closely with their volunteers and the volunteer working group, as you referenced. Importantly, they developed a pilot, and they then worked across the state with local units to receive feedback from those volunteers and their units in relation to that prototype. They really did a state tour in relation to that prototype to allow the volunteers to really touch and feel and understand what that truck would look like and the new features of the truck. That advice and feedback from volunteers went directly into the design team, which were then able to adjust specifications associated with the truck as required and ensure that, importantly, the next generation heavy rescue truck meets volunteers' needs when they are deployed over the coming years.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you. They are amazing, aren't they? I love looking at the way all the different bits and bobs fit together and how they get the tools in – it is quite amazing. From the road to the sky, please. Page 71 of BP3 details the aerial platform pumper initiative. What is being delivered under that initiative?

Kate FITZGERALD: That initiative is in relation to FRV?

Lauren KATHAGE: FRV's new aerial platform pumper initiative, on page 71 of BP3.

Kate FITZGERALD: FRV have obviously had that investment in relation to their aerial platform, which has been an area and a capability which they have been looking at to make sure that they have the most current capability required in that space. FRV have undertaken that work, and obviously with the additional investment that they have received through the state budget, they are now well advanced in relation to the design and procurement associated with those pumper platforms. They anticipate those being available to relevant stations, and when those pumper platforms are delivered, they will make those relevant decisions in relation to where they are deployed.

Lauren KATHAGE: I guess that program is especially relevant today as we see news from overseas of harrowing fires. Our thoughts are with everybody there dealing with that situation. Are FRV getting anything else under the 2024–25 budget, or is that the only addition to the kit?

Kate FITZGERALD: They received that \$15.39 million to replace the five pumper platform fire appliances in the 2024–25 budget, and they obviously continue to receive the state government grant funding as well.

Lauren KATHAGE: Are you aware of the different types of appliances or different types of supports under the 2024–25 budget?

Kate FITZGERALD: Beyond the pumper platforms? No. I can speak to their fleet more broadly. That is very comfortable to do in relation to FRV's fleet. As at 30 June, Fire Rescue Victoria had 27 new vehicles in the design, construction or testing phase. That included two rehab units, three new breathing apparatus support vehicles, 12 heavy pumpers, one ultralarge pumper, four heavy rescue vehicles and five pumper platforms. FRV is making strong progress in relation to updating its firefighting road appliances. It is obviously very dynamic in relation to the delivery of those. As I mentioned, the location of those new appliances will be determined based on the operational decisions of the fire rescue commissioner once those appliances come on line essentially. In addition the 2025–26 Victorian budget committed \$40 million over four years towards a rolling fleet replacement program for Fire Rescue Victoria. The first year has now been programmed in relation to that rolling fleet program, and at this stage they have allocated five new FRV series 1 pumpers and one ladder platform as part of that rolling fleet program. Again, that will be dynamic as operational needs and requirements inform that rolling fleet program over the next four years.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you, Ms Fitzgerald.

The CHAIR: Thank you. The committee is going to take a very short break before resuming this hearing at 11:15 am.

The committee will now resume its consideration of the Department of Justice and Community Safety. I am going to throw to Mr Welch.

Richard WELCH: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, secretariat. The Premier promised in December 2024 to have mask bans at protests. Did the department generate advice on blanket bans, and if so, when?

Emma CASSAR: I will invite Kathryn Bannon up to the table to provide that advice.

Kathryn BANNON: Thank you. The question was with respect to mask bans?

Richard WELCH: Yes.

Kathryn BANNON: The department, as with all government policy development –

Richard WELCH: Could you just speak into the microphone?

Kathryn BANNON: I am sorry. As with policy development, the department has provided advice to government on a range of issues. With respect to –

Richard WELCH: But on this – provided advice on this?

Kathryn BANNON: On masks? Following the Premier's announcement there was advice that has been provided with respect to masks.

Richard WELCH: I am terribly sorry. It is probably my hearing, but I cannot hear.

Kathryn BANNON: I will move it forward. Yes, there has been work done with respect to briefing on the issue of face masks that the Premier announced –

Richard WELCH: On the blanket ban?

Kathryn BANNON: The department has provided options for government, and as you would be aware, as part of the police and other matters Bill that passed the Legislative Assembly last week, there were reforms introduced with respect to face masks at protests.

Richard WELCH: Yes. Thank you for that. But originally it was a blanket ban. When did you get advice that they would not proceed with a blanket ban and that it would be a simpler version, a watered-down version?

Kathryn BANNON: The department, following the Premier's announcement, has worked through a range of issues with respect to the commitment.

Richard WELCH: When were you advised that it would not be a blanket ban?

Kathryn BANNON: The government introduced the Bill into the Parliament several weeks ago with respect to the settings –

Richard WELCH: But when was the department advised that it would not be a blanket ban?

Roma BRITNELL: That was when they committed to it?

Richard WELCH: Well, we will find out if it is, won't we, soon?

Kathryn BANNON: The settings which were agreed by government were the settings which were introduced in the police and others matters Bill that was introduced a couple of weeks ago –

Richard WELCH: For clarity, I am not asking about the Bill. I am asking when the department was advised that it would not be a blanket ban.

Kathryn BANNON: I would need to take that on notice with respect to the communication of that.

Richard WELCH: That is fine. Thank you. What specific legal advice warned that a blanket ban would be likely to be struck down, and from whom did you receive that advice?

Kathryn BANNON: The department engages with a range of stakeholders with respect to all policy development –

Richard WELCH: Yes, but I am asking who. I am asking which specific one.

Kathryn BANNON: As part of our engagement process in policy development that does include, if necessary, legal advice, which can be provided to government. I cannot go into details. Obviously legal professional privilege –

Richard WELCH: Did you receive legal advice?

Kathryn BANNON: with respect to any advice that is obtained by the department, so I cannot go into any details about specific –

Richard WELCH: I am not asking for details. I am simply asking whether you received legal advice.

Kathryn BANNON: As part of a broad policy development, it can include the obtaining of legal advice –

Richard WELCH: I am not talking about broad policy development. I am asking: did you receive specific legal advice on the fact that a broad-based total ban would be likely to be struck down? That is the question.

Kathryn BANNON: As I said, with respect to any advice the department may have obtained, that would be subject to legal professional privilege, and I am not in a position to be able to articulate any details of that.

Richard WELCH: Okay. Who ultimately made the decision to water down the ban? Was it the Premier, the Attorney-General, the police minister or the Solicitor-General?

Members interjecting.

The CHAIR: Excuse me. Mr Welch, could you please ask your question again?

Kathryn BANNON: With respect to the settings which were approved by government, they are what was introduced to Parliament several weeks ago, with respect to the settings about face masks, attachment devices and terrorist symbol offences.

Richard WELCH: But which minister made the decision? Who notified you?

Kathryn BANNON: I cannot speak to matters of government.

Emma CASSAR: That might be a question that would be best answered by government. The department has provided the advice, and I think Ms Bannon has answered that.

Richard WELCH: The police association describes this as a ‘pretty please’ Bill and says it will make no significant difference because the police will have to ask protesters one by one if they have a lawful excuse. How many additional charges per year does the government realistically expect to flow from this new mask power?

Emma CASSAR: Bill, do you want to come to the table? I am sorry, Chief Commissioner, do you want to add anything?

Mike BUSH: I think that is an impossible question to answer.

Richard WELCH: And that is fine. You can answer that. That is totally fine to answer that.

Emma CASSAR: It would be speculation, Mr Welch, and that is not an area we would go into.

Richard WELCH: Sure. But how will an individual officer in a volatile protest environment reliably determine whether a person will commit an offence in future, without exposing the state to legal challenge and civil liability?

Mike BUSH: In terms of the new legislation, we have been briefing our staff on how to apply this tactically. There will always be a challenge in these circumstances. So our staff are well briefed on the legislation, how to approach it and how to mitigate any risk around that.

Richard WELCH: So how will that happen? How will they prevent being challenged?

Mike BUSH: Well, it comes down to the detail. It is now around medical. So if there is a medical reason for having it, then they are not allowed to ask them to remove it, which is stronger than the previous, which was a health –

Richard WELCH: The question is: how will they determine that they will commit an offence in making their request?

Mike BUSH: On approach.

Lauren KATHAGE: Point of order.

The CHAIR: Excuse me, Mr Welch. There is a point of order.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you. I think the Chief Commissioner has been very generous answering questions out of scope, but it is obviously getting into operational matters, which probably are not best canvassed in public to ensure the effective work of our police officers. Seeing as it is out of scope as a question, I suggest that the member moves on.

The CHAIR: Mr Welch. If you bring it back to the terms of reference.

Richard WELCH: That is fine.

The CHAIR: I think the Chief Commissioner has been very generous in his answer, as well as me allowing you to step outside scope of this inquiry.

Richard WELCH: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Commissioner. I will ask about the ‘adult time for violent crime’ area. Now, in the Queensland version on which this is broadly modelled, the adult time regime covers 33 offences.

Michael GALEA: Was that announced this financial year?

Richard WELCH: Sorry?

Michael GALEA: This financial year?

Richard WELCH: Yes, but the crimes and the protests have been going on for three years. So this is addressing –

Mathew HILAKARI: You are struggling with the year, aren’t you?

The CHAIR: Excuse me, excuse me. Is there a point of order or just interjection? Is there a point of order? Mr Welch, as I have said many times during this week, if you can draw your question back to the scope and the terms of reference before the inquiry, I will allow the question. Perhaps rephrase the way in which you have asked it.

Richard WELCH: Did you provide advice on the list of offences considered for adult time in Victoria?

Emma CASSAR: I will throw to Marian in a moment, but the current is out of scope for the year.

Richard WELCH: So you did not provide them during the period of 2024–25? No advice in 2024–25?

Emma CASSAR: I thought you were asking – was it for adult crime?

Richard WELCH: Yes.

Roma BRITNELL: So you have not done any pre-work; this has all just happened recently. Nothing happened in 2024–25 to advise the government on how to address the crime situation we have got and the youth crimes that are being committed. There was no work done in 2024–25; you have just done all this in the last couple of months. Is that right?

Emma CASSAR: I was merely just clarifying which package of reform he was referring to, but of course the department provides a lot of advice on crime and crime prevention.

Richard WELCH: I will clarify the question: did you provide any advice in 2024–25 on this matter?

Emma CASSAR: I will go to Ms Chapman.

Marian CHAPMAN: In 2024–25 there were a range of reforms that we gave advice to government on.

Richard WELCH: No, but did you provide advice on this matter?

Marian CHAPMAN: On offences for violent crime?

Richard WELCH: ‘Adult time, adult crime’.

Marian CHAPMAN: Sorry, can you rephrase the question?

Richard WELCH: Did you provide, in 2024–25, advice on ‘adult time, adult crime’?

Marian CHAPMAN: ‘Adult time, adult crime’ was an announcement in the current financial year.

Roma BRITNELL: So no work was done to prepare for this in 2024–25? This is a rushed Bill that the community have just had –

Michael GALEA: Point of order.

Roma BRITNELL: thrown out as a political agenda.

The CHAIR: Excuse me, Deputy Chair, there is a point of order. Mr Galea.

Michael GALEA: Not for the first time today, I ask the Deputy Chair to cease putting words into the witnesses' mouths and misrepresenting what they are saying. The witness has very clearly outlined that this is a Bill that relates to the current financial year, not the 2024–25 financial year that this inquiry is looking at. They are wasting their own time by asking these questions that they know to be outside the scope of the terms of reference.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Galea.

Roma BRITNELL: What has the government got to hide?

The CHAIR: Excuse me, Deputy Chair, do you want to speak to the point of order?

Jade BENHAM: I will speak to the point of order, please, Chair.

The CHAIR: Go ahead, Ms Benham.

Jade BENHAM: The terms of reference for this inquiry state that these hearings are to 'improve the transparency and clarity in the reporting of public sector performance'. All of these questions that the government members are trying to defend against are actually relevant to improving that clarity and transparency of reporting, are they not?

The CHAIR: Ms Benham, that was not the point of order that Mr Galea raised. The point of order that Mr Galea raised was reminding the Deputy Chair and other members of this committee not to put words into the mouths of witnesses.

Jade BENHAM: Seeking clarity, Chair, is not putting words into someone's mouth.

The CHAIR: Ms Benham, if you want to raise a separate point of order, you are more than welcome to do so, but I am trying to rule on this point of order. I would remind all members of this committee, again, not to put words into the mouths of witnesses, particularly when asking them a direct question.

Roma BRITNELL: Let us wait until we see *Hansard* whether that is actually the case, because it was not.

The CHAIR: Excuse me, Deputy Chair. Mr Welch, this is your time to ask questions. Do you have a question you would like to ask?

Richard WELCH: I do; I have lots of questions. Great. Okay. I am going back to the question. Did you provide advice on the 'adult time, adult crime' Bill or the policy in 2024–25?

Michael GALEA: Point of order.

The CHAIR: Very quickly, Mr Galea.

Michael GALEA: Apologies for the point of order, Chair, but Mr Welch is outright ignoring your last ruling on the previous point of order.

Roma Britnell interjected.

The CHAIR: I am going to rule –

Roma BRITNELL: Who is the Chair?

The CHAIR: Unless you wish to speak to the point of order, Deputy Chair, I am going to rule on this point of order. I think the question is within scope, because you have drawn it back to the 2024–25 period. If Ms Chapman would like to answer the question, Mr Welch, perhaps you would like to ask it again to make it clear?

Richard WELCH: Did you provide policy advice, legal advice or studies on the ‘adult time, adult crime’ policy or Bill prospect in 2024–25?

Marian CHAPMAN: In 2024–25, as you would know, the government had a community safety focus. There is a range of advice provided by the government.

Richard WELCH: No, please just be specific to the question. Did you provide it on this matter?

Marian CHAPMAN: Sorry, I am trying to answer. We have provided a range of advice on different policy questions for government, which has resulted in a range of legislation through the 2024–25 year which have hit the Parliament, and we are currently advising on adult time for violent crime.

Richard WELCH: Okay. But I am asking you about this specific piece of policy, and I want a specific answer as to that specific piece of policy.

Marian CHAPMAN: I am trying to answer that.

Richard WELCH: Well, no, I have not heard it yet. It is a very simple answer that is required.

The CHAIR: Excuse me, Mr Welch. Ms Chapman is trying to answer your question, and I heard her quite clearly. Ms Chapman, if you want to repeat that answer to this question, then perhaps we can move on.

Marian CHAPMAN: We provide a range of policy advice on different questions that government asks of the department. They are all in the community safety field, and as I said, in the 2024–25 year they have resulted in a range of legislative reforms, particularly around bail. We have talked about the machete program, and we are now advising on the policy settings for a Bill that government has announced will be later this year – in the current financial year.

Richard WELCH: So masks. ‘Adult time, adult crime’ – did you consider that?

Marian CHAPMAN: Masks?

Richard WELCH: ‘Adult time, adult crime’ – the question I have been trying to ask now for 5 minutes. Did you provide advice on that?

Marian CHAPMAN: I do not know what else I can say.

Richard WELCH: Yes or no?

Marian CHAPMAN: We have provided a range of advice, and I cannot go into the specifics of individual pieces of advice.

Richard WELCH: I am not asking you to go into the specifics. I am simply asking you to confirm what you advised on.

The CHAIR: Excuse me. I am going to make this very clear. I have in previous –

Roma Britnell interjected.

The CHAIR: Excuse me, Deputy Chair. You will cease your interjection. I am going to make this very clear: committee members at this table can ask witnesses questions – we ask many questions – but we cannot tell witnesses how to answer your question. Mr Welch, before you proceed with that, that is exactly what you just did to Ms Chapman. Ms Chapman, did you want to repeat your answer, and perhaps we can move on?

Richard WELCH: No, I will happily move on. It is a waste of time. In regard to workplace protection orders, when did the government first provide a formal proposal for WPO-style legislation?

Emma CASSAR: Thank you for the question, Mr Welch. I will throw to Kathryn Bannon to answer that.

Kathryn BANNON: Thank you, Secretary. The department has been working closely with a number of stakeholders with respect to understanding the issues of retail violence. That includes –

Richard WELCH: No, the question was when – when. I do not need a description of it. I just need to know when.

Kathryn BANNON: The issue of workplace violence and the range of reforms which could address that has been ongoing. I do not have a specific date I can give you, but I can say over the last several years it has been something we have been working on. As you would be aware, Parliament has considered the retail offences, which passed the Assembly last week and I believe –

Richard WELCH: Thank you. And so when did you sign off on the April 2026 timetable for its implementation?

Kathryn BANNON: I believe you are referring to the Premier's announcement with respect to bringing reforms to Parliament with respect to a worker protection order scheme. That is a matter for government. I cannot speak to the Premier's timing.

Richard WELCH: But did the department sign off on it?

Kathryn BANNON: As I have said, the department provided a range of advice and a range of different policy reforms and considerations that have been informed by working with the retail sector, with unions, obviously both retail and transport, the OPP, Victoria Police.

Richard WELCH: Thank you. Because it has been in gestation such a long time, you have been considering it for a long time and only now gone forward with it, what were the specific concerns prior to this that prevented this being brought forward?

Kathryn BANNON: I am sorry, specific concerns?

Richard WELCH: Well, were there concerns in bringing this forward? This has only come forward now, as we have just said. It has been in consideration for a number of years, so what were the prior concerns that meant it was not brought forward till now?

Emma CASSAR: Mr Welch, I do not think Kathryn was referring to concerns. I think this is just about, you know, policy evolution, and those are really questions for government.

Roma BRITNELL: Can we just go back to the machete bins? Can I just clarify that you said that the trial is over; the machete bins are no longer going to be in use. Therefore that would indicate that the knives have all gone off the streets. We have just seen an 11-year-old boy stabbed in a primary school.

Michael GALEA: Point of order.

The CHAIR: Excuse me, Deputy Chair.

Roma BRITNELL: Is it possible to accept that this is not over, and this crime wave is clearly out of control?

Michael Galea interjected.

The CHAIR: Mr Galea! Do you have a point of order?

Michael GALEA: Yes. Once again, the Deputy Chair is completely misrepresenting what witnesses have stated to this committee. It is disrespectful to the witnesses. It is disrespectful to Victoria Police.

The CHAIR: I am going to rule. Ms Benham, did you wish to speak to the point of order?

Jade BENHAM: No, but I will have one at the end of this session.

The CHAIR: I am going to rule on the point of order. I will again remind all members, including the Deputy Chair, you are not to put words in the mouths of witnesses before us. This is not question time, this is the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee. Before us today we have a public inquiry where we are seeking information from witnesses. This is not the opportunity to go ahead and continue to put words in the mouths of witnesses – words that they did not in fact say. Deputy Chair, did you want to reframe?

Roma BRITNELL: No. We will move on. Go back to your question.

Jade BENHAM: I am sorry, during my line of questioning it was stated earlier that machete bins were going to be recycled, so we will check *Hansard* for that. But I want to talk about the ankle bracelet monitoring program 2024–25. How many participants were there in that program?

Emma CASSAR: For youth justice, are you talking?

Jade BENHAM: Yes, sorry – youth justice ankle bracelet program.

Emma CASSAR: Right, so just so I can get the right information for you, we will welcome Andrea back to the desk.

Andrea DAVIDSON: At the outset I would just say that the trial itself only commenced on 22 April this year. Since that time we have had 76 assessments ordered for that program. Of those 76 assessments, we have had 25 young people that have been deemed suitable by a bail decision maker to be part of that program.

Jade BENHAM: Is the decision-maker a magistrate or a –

Andrea DAVIDSON: A magistrate or a judge of either the Children’s Court or the Supreme Court.

Jade BENHAM: Okay, great. So 25 out of 76 have been deemed suitable?

Andrea DAVIDSON: That is correct.

Jade BENHAM: What are the criteria that deem someone suitable or not suitable for bail?

Andrea DAVIDSON: The department undertakes a suitability assessment, which is quite an extensive assessment. It looks at a range of issues or potential considerations in relation to the young person’s suitability but also the suitability of the location to have the technology installed. That also extends to, for example, things like sensory assessments with young people to ensure that they are actually able to manage the item that will be attached to them for that time. It also looks at things like their education and their ability to comply with a structured day, and then it develops a timetable that the decision-maker is –

Jade BENHAM: Thank you, that is fine. I want to go back to the tobacco licensing scheme, if at all possible in the time that we have left, and talk about the employment of the 14 inspectors and whether they are expected to be able to keep up with inspections.

Kathryn BANNON: Thank you for the question. I think you had asked that previously. I can confirm that the inspectors recruitment campaign did not kick off until this financial year. Simply, the focus for the 2024–25 financial year was on the licensing team, which was responsible for considering applications, which went live on 1 July.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Bannon. We are going to Mr Tak.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you, Chair, Secretary and officials. I have a few questions on SES infrastructure. I note that the state has experienced a busy storm season, including what appeared to be a likely tornado in the western suburbs. I also take this opportunity to say thank you to our SES volunteers, who continue to work tirelessly for their community. Secretary, the questionnaire on pages 49 and 50 refers to delivering emergency service upgrades and the reprioritisation of funding for the Bannockburn and Kilmore VICSES units. What is the status of these two projects? I understand that the sod turn has taken place with the minister.

Emma CASSAR: Thank you for the question, Mr Tak. Yes, I concur – our SES volunteers are superheroes and have done an incredible job with all the environmental challenges that have fallen their way. I will throw to Ms Fitzgerald to answer that question.

Kate FITZGERALD: Thank you, Secretary. Thank you, Mr Tak. Sonia Meloni, the CEO of the Community Safety Building Authority, will join me to provide some further detail in relation to the important work that VICSES and the Community Safety Building Authority have been undertaking in this space. Importantly, I would recognise that the Victorian State Emergency Service high-priority infrastructure statewide increased by \$2.21 million to a total TEI of \$127.72 million due to additional funding to support the delivery of tranche 2 projects. CSBA has been working very closely with the Victorian State Emergency Service to deliver those builds, including in Bannockburn, as you outlined. I will ask Ms Meloni to provide a bit more detail in relation to the progress of that work.

Sonia MELONI: Thank you. Specifically in relation to Kilmore VICSES, as you mentioned, there was a sod turn this week that happened on Tuesday, which was very successful and attended by a broad range of people. We have currently appointed Barpa constructions as the builder for that project. The project is now in construction, and we are expecting it to be completed and operational in mid-2026. In regards to Bannockburn, which you also referenced, that was funded in the 2023–24 budget. We have currently developed the design, and a planning permit was issued in June 2025. The head contractor is expected to be appointed in the coming weeks, with construction to commence in early 2026 and to be completed and operational in late 2026.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you. I will go on to the Rochester and Heathcote ES hubs. The two regions also experienced devastating floods back in 2022, with the CFA and the SES facility also experiencing extensive damage. Referring to the questionnaire, on page 51, one of the existing projects is the repair of the Rochester and Heathcote VICSES emergency hub. Could you please give us an update on the status of these projects, and why has that \$3.14 million shifted from operating to capital expenditure?

Kate FITZGERALD: I will ask Ms Meloni to take us through the detail in relation to that project. Thanks.

Sonia MELONI: Thank you. In regard to the reference to the \$3.46 million, that was for land at both Heathcote and Rochester; however, it was not included in the announced funding. Therefore there was a request made through to the Treasurer, who approved that funding being reclassified as capital, and that has occurred to align with the budget for project delivery and our accounting standards.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you. Also, can you explain how the CFA and the SES volunteers will operate together in this emergency services hub?

Kate FITZGERALD: Yes, I can speak to that. That is more of an emergency services question. As part of the work that CSBA have been doing with both the Country Fire Authority and the Victoria State Emergency Service, they are highly engaged in the build, and so they have got a really good understanding in relation to what that unit will look like, that station will look like for the volunteers when it becomes operational. Importantly, as part of that work CFA and VICSES will work very closely together to design the operating model for those emergency services facilities to ensure that they have a good understanding of each other's operational requirements but also business-as-usual requirements that are needed and to ensure that they can complement each other in terms of the use of that facility. And SES and CFA will undertake that work, so they will be in a good position by the time that those units are commissioned.

Meng Heang TAK: All good then. The four VICSES units that I referred to earlier are all regional. Secretary, and perhaps through you, how will they seek to improve those regions' overall preparedness and response for future weather events?

Kate FITZGERALD: I can speak to that, Mr Tak. I think it is a really important question. As I have mentioned previously, obviously the impact of climate change is really impacting our regional communities in particular. In particular we are seeing increases in relation to the intensity of storms, which the State Emergency Service is the control agency for. Obviously through our regional communities we have also seen significant flooding over the last several years. Obviously we have worked very closely with VICSES to identify where those demand and operational requirements are for the agency over the coming years. But importantly, we also work with them to understand where they will get their volunteers from, because obviously it is one thing to build a great brigade or unit or station, but from the CFA and SES perspective, we need to ensure that they have

the right volunteers joining as well. The SES really has always been a very regionally focused organisation, and they are ensuring that they continue to have the operational capability and resources required. Obviously the government is making that investment in those regional communities, and VICSES in particular, alongside all of our other emergency services agencies, has participated significantly in the preparedness for the high-risk weather season, which we are now currently in.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you. Moving on to VESEP, I refer you back to page 140 of the budget update 2024–25, outcomes ‘Supporting our emergency services and volunteers’ initiative, which mentions that funding has been provided to the volunteer emergency services equipment program, noting that the recipients were announced also recently. Could you explain how much additional funding will now be available for emergency services organisations?

Kate FITZGERALD: As I mentioned, as part of the government’s announcements in late last year they announced a doubling of the VESEP program for four years, so an additional \$62 million to be provided to the VESEP program. That is approximately \$15 million to be added to VESEP annually over the next four years. As I mentioned, that has enabled us to allocate within the 2025–26 financial year \$30.6 million in grants across the emergency services agencies. In relation to CFA and the benefits that they have received through the VESEP program for this financial year, there are 166 brigades and districts that will share in \$22.6 million in funding allocated to the CFA. In relation to SES, there are 58 units that will share in \$5 million in funding allocated to VICSES through this round. I would be very happy to take you through some of the detail of some of those local initiatives, if you are happy for me to expand on that Mr Tak.

Meng Heang TAK: Yes, please.

Kate FITZGERALD: In relation to the CFA, the funding investment there is \$22.6 million. Thirteen brigades will receive \$445,000 each for new medium tankers, including at Balnarring, Lorne, Mansfield, Marong, Mortlake, Seymour, Silvan, Strathkellar and Warragul. There are 10 CFA brigades including Belmont, Corangamite, Grenville, Lake Boga and Whipstick, who will receive \$150,000 each to purchase new big-fill vehicles, significantly improving their operational capability. Importantly, 31 CFA brigades, including Benalla, Birchip, Churchill, Corryong, Geelong West, Grampians, Nareen, Northern Campaspe, Point Cook and Sale, will receive over \$70,000 each to purchase new field command vehicles. There is also investment in relation to hygiene trailers, extensions to stations, roller door modifications, purchasing of rescue support vehicles and installation of pressure pumps for water transfer occurring within CFA brigades as a result of the investment in the VESEP program.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you. Apart from the two major organisations, namely the CFA and SES, I understand that there are smaller ones, such as Life Saving Victoria, who also applied for the VESEP program. Could you run me through some of the other organisations that benefit and the types and things that were funded?

Kate FITZGERALD: Yes. It is an important point that outside of CFA and VICSES there are other volunteer organisations that are provided funding. In the 2025–26 VESEP round that has included the Lorne Surf Life Saving Club, who will receive \$60,000 to purchase a side-by-side vehicle and various operational equipment such as rescue tubes, flags, CPR mannequins and first aid equipment. Rosebud and McCrae Life Saving Club will receive over \$35,000 to support the purchase of a patrol trailer and a side-by-side vehicle. Portland coast guard and Port Welshpool coast guard will receive over \$40,000 each to support the purchase of new vehicles. The Mallacoota coast guard will receive \$8,000 to support the purchase of a new boat trailer, and the Echuca & Moama Search & Rescue Squad will receive over \$155,000 to help undertake facility improvements, including a new accessible bathroom and change room. In addition, in the 2024–25 round, the Ocean Grove, Seaspray and Venus Bay surf life saving clubs received over \$30,000 each to purchase four-wheel drive vehicles. These vehicles allow volunteer lifesavers to patrol more efficiently and quickly reach difficult-to-access areas where emergencies may occur. They enable lifesavers to transport essential rescue equipment and bring injured patients to safety.

In relation to search and rescue, the Shepparton search and rescue squad has received \$129,000 to replace their road crash rescue truck, and that will provide the squad with a truck that has automatic transmission, enabling more volunteers to be able to drive it. The Mount Hotham volunteer ski patrol will receive \$7,000 to purchase three new trailers, and importantly, this will reduce manual handling for their volunteers. The Port Albert coast

guard will receive over \$84,000 to replace their vehicle, which will be used as the primary tow vehicle for their vessel.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you.

Mathew HILAKARI: I have got to say, I was on the phone to the CFA secretary for Point Cook. Their command vehicle was announced yesterday, and they are pretty happy and excited about that. Certainly Werribee South and the volunteer coast guard are pretty excited about what they are receiving as well. It a really great program. Thank you to the department for running it, because we have got some great volunteers out there who really deserve the support that we are able to give them.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you, Mr Hilakari. Secretary, I will move on to the casino, gaming and liquor regulations. I note that the annual report 2024–25 on page 64 shows liquor licence and permit approvals being completed within the set timeframe at 86 per cent, which is above the 85 per cent target and a substantial improvement on the 71.2 per cent reported in the 2023–24 annual reports on the same page. Could you talk to us about this achievement?

Emma CASSAR: Of course, Mr Tak. I will ask Ms Bannon to elaborate.

Kathryn BANNON: Thank you for the question, Mr Tak. Yes, I am pleased to let the committee know about the improvements that Liquor Control Victoria has undertaken with respect to their licensing program of work. As you noted, the improvements with respect to the reported outcomes for their percentage of licences considered within the required 77 days were within the performance measure. But in more detail, I can say that the average liquor licence in 2024–25 was actually processed within 47 days, and this included and built on a range of improvements that Liquor Control Victoria had undertaken both with respect to its website and with respect to content, working with licences as they were going through applications and particularly improving the form-based process that we had so people were able to understand how to complete the form accurately in the first instance. We have launched 10 digital forms, which are available through Service Victoria. And since we launched these forms, which are smart forms and enable people to obtain information at various points through the licensing process, we have received 1278 applications as of 5 November 2025. I am also really pleased to advise the committee that in addition to having more efficient processing times as a result of these smart forms, we also have a customer satisfaction score for the digital forms at over 90 per cent.

We have also focused on improving the web content for applicants and potential applicants to understand when they need a licence, understanding that for a number of local community groups, issues for temporary limited licences or major event licences for significant events in the state can be processes that people do not do routinely and can be a little bit overwhelming, and they do not understand necessarily in the same way that a seasoned hotelier may understand the system a little bit more. Liquor Control Victoria has undertaken a significant amount of work to improve the accessibility of the content of the material on the website and has also, in improving the easier-to-understand web content, enabled self-service, which also has helped with the call centre contacts as well. This has enabled the call centre to really focus on applicants who need more assistance and may not be able to self-serve as they are working through that program.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you. I will come back to accessibility in terms of language in our multicultural community who also run small businesses – the backbone of our economy. The same annual report from 2024–25 on page 62 notes a technology uplift in Liquor Control Victoria, including 10 new digital application forms that reduce the processing time. Also, I am very keen to know how this digital upgrade has improved efficiency and also what type of new forms have been introduced in this space.

Kathryn BANNON: Yes, thank you. As I mentioned, the smart forms and the new forms have really been a game changer for Liquor Control Victoria and have been so well received by the sector and by the community who have utilised them. Those forms were very much informed by working with the sector to understand where the pain points had been in a licence application process, as well as working really closely with our call centre staff to understand what types of calls they were getting from people and where they were having confusion in going through a form. We unfortunately had issues where people were a little bit confused. They would be submitting an application that was missing key information, which then resulted in delays. And we can absolutely understand that frustration where people are doing their absolute best to provide the information

that they need for the regulator to consider the application only to miss something and then have a back-and-forth with the regulator.

So the technology built into the smart form, as I mentioned, has a number of key information points where people can access the relevant information about what the question is trying to obtain, whether that be information or the event – if it is a variation of a licence or a new permanent licence, it explains the steps that will occur with respect to whether an application has to be published for members of the community – so there will be details for people to be able to understand where a publication notice has to be placed, how the application will also progress with Victoria Police, noting that certain applications will go through a consideration with Victoria Police and with council as well. As part of that process, the smart forms now will not allow an applicant to submit a form until all the required fields are completed and through that, as I mentioned, we have seen significant periods of improvement. Currently for 2025–26, as at the end of October, we are now down to an average liquor licence being processed in 43 days. In addition to the smart forms and the improved web content, we have seen a four-day decrease in average licensing application determinations.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you. I am a regular customer at a restaurant in my patch that also has liquor, you know, beer and wine in his restaurant. He is very pleased with the way in which the website has been made easier for busy people like him to operate. Can you tell us more about how this improved communication and language in terms of forms on the LCV website have made it more accessible, easy to understand and reduced waiting times.

Kathryn BANNON: Thank you for that. With respect to the approach to improving the website and the forms, it has very much been focused on and informed by the Victorian government's accessible communication policy. That has provided guidance with respect to a year 8 readability level, which is commonly understood to be understood by around 83 per cent of Australians. In developing the new content, it has now been engaged, as I mentioned, with communities from a range of places across the state, both hospitality, restaurateurs, through to major event licensees, understanding that not everyone needs the same type of information at various points in the process. Some operators will undertake the entire process individually, and we need to make sure the information is accessible for them as well.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you. Thank you, Chair.

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

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Chair. Good morning. Just to start us off, there has been some reporting that people in our state are spending entire jail terms in police cells. Can I ask: over the reporting period, how many people in Victoria completed their entire sentences in police cells rather than prisons?

Emma CATFORD: I think we might need to take that question on notice in terms of the specifics.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. Thank you.

Emma CASSAR: If it is helpful, we understand the absolute pressure on police cells and certainly the commissioner and I are having conversations about what we can do to alleviate that and to move people through quickly. I visited the custody centre last week to see how things were tracking, and I am sure the police commissioner and I will have more to say about that very soon.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. And for the committee's consideration, we would assume you are tracking this data. Correct?

Emma CATFORD: If I may, we do. Between ourselves and Victoria Police, we are obviously watching how long people are in a police cell for through the court process and depending on their circumstances, whether they are bailed, receive a sentence et cetera. It is quite dynamic with respect to how many people are, depending on their journey.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. Thank you. Is it possible also to find out for the budget period how many people were held for more than 14 days in police cells?

Emma CATFORD: I believe between us we should be able to answer that question.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. On another matter, I will ask about the continuing practice of decanting, which to my understanding is shuffling people across prisons and police cells. How many prisoners were being decanted across the state during the reporting period?

Mike BUSH: I cannot give you the exact number, but I do acknowledge that occurs and it is in terms of making sure that we have places for those people. It is an unfortunate practice, but it must exist to ensure that we have beds for those people. In terms of giving you the exact numbers, that would require quite a piece of work, but if you need it, we will engage in it.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you so much. Can I get a sense: has that practice escalated over the reporting period?

Emma CASSAR: Can I just add a point of clarification before you move on? You mentioned that people were being moved between prisons and police cells.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: I understand it is referred to as decanting.

Mike BUSH: I think between police stations is what you are referring to. They might be moved from one station to another as capacity allows.

Emma CASSAR: If someone is in prison, it is Corrections Victoria who would manage their sentence and their time. If it is police cells, then it is a police operation.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Between prisons themselves and police cells – is that a separate practice? Is there a term for that?

Emma CATFORD: The Commissioner of Corrections Victoria may be able to provide further detail, but if we are required to bring someone to court, for example, if they are accommodated in a prison, we will make arrangements for them to be provided, say, to the Melbourne Custody Centre for their attendance at court that day, and then they will return to prison. That would be the movement between police cells or back from prison to a police cell, but they would then return to corrections custody. Larissa may like to talk further to that.

Larissa STRONG: I am just confirming the Deputy Secretary is correct. Police manage the movement within police cells. We do then receive people from police cells into the prison system. When they go back to a police cell, it is because they have got a court hearing in a particular court. They might just go back for the day for their court hearing at Heidelberg Magistrates' Court, for example. Those holding cells are operated by Victoria Police, and then they return to us back into the prison system custody, unless they are released at court.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. On decanting specifically, you have now clarified what that would entail – between the police stations. Why would that typically be happening?

Mike BUSH: When one place is at capacity and there is capacity elsewhere.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. I might move on. Just looking at the performance measure on daily out-of-cell hours in secure prisons – I believe it is page 103. The result for the measure of average daily out-of-cell hours, secure prisons, did not meet its target for 2024–25, due to staff resourcing pressures. Which prisons were most affected by that?

Emma CASSAR: Thank you for the question. I will throw to the Commissioner, but I can absolutely say they have done a lot of work in scaling up their workforce to ensure that they have enough staff moving forward. Commissioner, would you like to add anything to that?

Larissa STRONG: Thank you for the question. For secure prisons the out-of-cell hours target was 10.5 and the actual was 9.6 hours, so we did not meet the target. That is primarily due to a number of things. We did change our out-of-cell hours on a temporary basis at medium-security prisons – in the male system, I should say. That was Marnongneet, Loddon and Hopkins. The other one will be Dame Phyllis Frost Centre that I suspect is impacting on that particular target. We can give you more details, but they were the ones I understand

Aiv PUGLIELLI: On notice, if that is all right. That would be great. Thank you. Is it possible for the committee to be provided with the average daily out-of-cell hours for each prison?

Larissa STRONG: I think that should be appropriate.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. Can I ask: of the current remand population, how many people are charged with violent offences?

Larissa STRONG: I do not have that information right at hand of the breakdown of the current remand population. I think from my memory the most serious offending that we tend to have in remand is assault. That is obviously a broad category, but we can provide more information on that.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: If there is information coming on notice, can I also ask how many were for nonviolent property offences and how many for other nonviolent offences?

Larissa STRONG: We can take that on notice in terms of the breakdown of the most serious offending of the remand population of what they have been obviously charged with as opposed to –

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. Can I ask: how many people are currently on remand solely for alleged breaches of bail conditions?

Larissa STRONG: That is another one we will have to take on notice in terms of the breakdown.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. Moving on, can I ask: since the introduction of the March bail reforms have the number of lockdowns across corrections and youth corrections facilities increased?

Larissa STRONG: Since March 2025?

Aiv PUGLIELLI: March this year.

Larissa STRONG: No, I do not believe so.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. Were we able –

Emma CASSAR: That is for adult corrections. Your question was also for youth justice.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Was also youth corrections.

Emma CASSAR: Yes, so we will just bring the youth justice commissioner up.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you.

Mathew HILAKARI: That is in the 2024–25 period, isn't it?

Emma CASSAR: So it is March till –

Mathew HILAKARI: March to June.

Emma CASSAR: Yes. Correct.

Mathew HILAKARI: Okay.

Andrea DAVIDSON: Can I just clarify that the question relates to isolation?

Aiv PUGLIELLI: It is the number of lockdowns across youth corrections facilities in this instance. Has that increased since the March bail reforms were introduced?

Andrea DAVIDSON: I think it is important to clarify that in youth justice we do not have rolling lockdowns per se. The publicly reportable data is in relation to isolation episodes. What I can report is in relation to isolation episodes: across the period January to March there was a total of 6300 episodes, and then in the period April to June there was a total of 13,000 episodes. What is really important, though, is to

acknowledge that those isolation episodes are both behavioural based and may also then be security-based isolation. So that total is inclusive of total isolations, not necessarily in relation to numbers per se.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. Thank you. Can I get some data provided to the committee if possible: how many lockdowns occurred for both corrections and youth corrections facilities for the year 2024 and the figure for the year 2025?

Emma CASSAR: Yes, of course. We will take that on notice.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. Moving on, can I ask: since those March reforms passed the Parliament have any additional duty lawyers been given to Victoria Legal Aid to take into account increased demand?

Emma CASSAR: I will hand that question to Marian.

Marian CHAPMAN: Victoria Legal Aid did receive some additional funding this year to account for expected additional demand. I can get you the breakdown of what that has gone to.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. That would be much appreciated. How about for community legal centres?

Marian CHAPMAN: I do not believe for community legal centres. Predominantly Victoria Legal Aid does most of that work. But I will check and take that one on notice.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you very much. And, if you are checking on notice, Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service as well.

Marian CHAPMAN: Yes. VALS did receive funding as well, and I can give you those figures.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. Much appreciated. On another matter, does the department have data on the number of businesses in Victoria that are selling illicit tobacco?

Emma CASSAR: I will see if Kathryn Bannon has the answer to that question – or VicPol.

Mike BUSH: I did not hear the question.

Emma CASSAR: Sorry, would you mind repeating the question?

Aiv PUGLIELLI: It is the number of businesses in our state that are selling illicit tobacco.

Kathryn BANNON: The department is working with our partners, including Victoria Police but also Commonwealth intelligence sources, with respect to understanding the illicit market in Victoria. There have been various reporting figures that have been published with respect to media outlets that have done that work, but with respect to the risk profile and the intelligence-led approach that the regulator will have when compliance and enforcement start on 1 February, we are looking to verify some of those broader public reporting figures, and it is something which does change quite continuously.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. I appreciate that response. Is there a figure that you have to hand at this point that you can provide to the committee?

Kathryn BANNON: I can take that on notice with respect to how validated the data is that we have received, because we do receive a lot of intelligence and not all has been validated, but I am happy to take that on notice.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. Can I ask why Victoria Police are not closing down tobacconists that are blatantly selling illicit tobacco?

Mike BUSH: The only answer I can give to that is we have two teams that are permanently focused on that, and they make every effort to do that.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Nothing further to add? Okay. Thank you. I will move on. Can I ask: how many times were police called out to incidents where drug use was a factor during the 2024–25 period?

Mike BUSH: I would definitely have to take that on notice, but I cannot give you any assurance that we actually hold that data.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. Thank you. Is there any indication that you can give to the committee of typically how many officers would be called out in those incidents?

Mike BUSH: Called out? You mean –

Aiv PUGLIELLI: So if there is a call-out and it is an incident occurring where drug use is a factor, how many officers typically would be called out in that scenario?

Mike BUSH: In terms of calls for service, so responding to calls for service?

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Yes.

Mike BUSH: Again, we can look into that for you, but I cannot give you an assurance that we hold that specific data.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. Thank you. Can I ask: with regard to call-outs responding to a mental health crisis, what is the police protocol in these incidents around use of firearms as opposed to nonlethal de-escalation methods?

Mike BUSH: The same as it would be for any operational matter. We do have an entire risk management tool that informs our people. Mental health is one of the considerations, strong considerations, on how we approach that.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: How is it considered? Can you tell us some more information?

Mike BUSH: In terms of the detail, there is a lot of detail, so I cannot go into that here.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: You cannot or you will not?

Mike BUSH: I do not have it.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: You do not have it. Okay. Thank you. Much appreciated. I will move on to another matter. Can I ask: from the department's perspective, are police considered experts at preventing crime?

Mike BUSH: Could you ask that question again, please?

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Yes. Does the department consider police experts at preventing crime?

Mike BUSH: Do we, the police, consider ourselves experts? Is that the question?

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Yes.

Mike BUSH: Or does justice consider police the experts?

Aiv PUGLIELLI: It could be both. I am happy to receive both answers.

Mike BUSH: I will throw to you first, and then I will –

Emma CASSAR: No problem, Commissioner. Are police experts at preventing crime? I think they are, and what the department's view would be is that they are just one part and that we know crime prevention and community safety touches many more elements than just Victoria Police. They do play a key role, just as the department plays a key role.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. Thank you.

Mike BUSH: And I can confirm that the new operating model that we have put forward in Victoria Police very much has a prevention and early intervention community partnership. Who assesses us as experts is another question, but it is something we – and I personally – are very familiar with. I have myself developed

crime prevention models which have been introduced and been successful. Who the arbitrator is in terms of our expertise is not a matter for us, but we partner with academics globally on the subject of crime prevention.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. Can I ask – and this is probably for the perspective of the department, I would say, rather than the police here, as you have indicated – does that expertise surpass that of a public health response?

Emma CASSAR: I am not sure I understand your question.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: If we were considering preventing crime, where does the expertise sit most? Is it a public health response, or is it with police themselves?

Emma CASSAR: I would say you are asking me for an opinion as opposed to anything further, and it is not my role to give opinions. But I am more than happy to talk to policy merit on things.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Sure.

The CHAIR: It is also not something, Secretary, that we ask for.

Emma CASSAR: Okay.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: No worries. I might move on. Can I confirm: the neo-Nazi attack on Camp Sovereignty that happened earlier this year, is that being treated as a terrorist attack?

Mike BUSH: That was considered. The charges that are before the court are in terms of affray. Our investigators definitely considered what the appropriate charges could be based on the evidence, and that is why those charges are before the court.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. On neo-Nazis generally, are neo-Nazis monitored by Victoria Police? It is whether you monitor them, is my question.

Mike BUSH: I have to be very careful about how I answer that. That is a very operational matter. But we monitor anything that will challenge public safety.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. Thank you. I might move on. The 2024–25 budget included funding for the trial of electronic monitoring devices on young people. Can I ask: what measurable impact has that trial had on repeat offending for the people who participated?

Emma CASSAR: I will ask the youth justice commissioner to come up. But as she gave in evidence earlier, that trial is still underway.

Andrea DAVIDSON: As mentioned earlier, the trial commenced on 22 April, and we have had 25 young people that have been deemed suitable across that period of time. I think what is really important, back to the earlier question around suitability assessment, is that obviously this is the highest tariff bail that a young person can receive, so often they are young people that have either had patterns of repeat offending or quite serious offences. What I can tell you, acknowledging that the evaluation is obviously pending, is that of those 25 young people, nine young people thus far have successfully completed the program. That is that they have participated in electronic monitoring and it has been deemed suitable to remove the bracelet, or they have been sentenced with a successful bail period having been completed.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: And on what basis would the bracelet have been removed? What is the consideration that leads to that decision?

Andrea DAVIDSON: Sorry, in terms of the bail decision-maker?

Aiv PUGLIELLI: As in the instance where the bracelet has been removed from the person, what are the key considerations that led to that outcome?

Andrea DAVIDSON: The bracelet can be removed by the bail decision-maker at any point. I think what is really important is that when young people come to the end of their bail period, that is when the electronic monitoring bracelet is generally removed. However, what can also occur is that through the judicial monitoring process, which is a really important feature of our electronic monitoring program, there is feedback to the court

and the bail decision-maker as to the young person's progress, and they then have the opportunity through that process to determine that the young person no longer requires the electronic monitoring device and may continue, really importantly, with the supports that are an incredibly important part of that program.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. I might move on. In March this year the government responded to the Integrity and Oversight Committee's Inquiry into the Operation of the *Freedom of Information Act 1982*. Just looking specifically at the committee's recommendation to replace our state's outdated FOI regime with a more modern right-to-information scheme, what progress has been made on that recommendation?

Kathryn BANNON: I can advise the committee that the government response to the IOC's recommendation was that the matter was under consideration. It is something that the department is working with OVIC on, understanding OVIC made substantial representations to the committee about the issues from their perspective, as well as the multitude of submissions that were made by other participants and users of the system. So that is a matter that we are continuing to work up advice to government on.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. Thank you. Is there an estimated timeframe for completing that work?

Kathryn BANNON: I would have to take that on notice.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: No worries. Thank you. On another matter, are Victoria Police meant to offer medical attention if someone is injured at a protest?

Mike BUSH: That would apply anywhere. We are here to keep people safe, and if people are injured, whether it is at a protest or anywhere else, all our staff are qualified or certified in first aid. They would administer as they would anywhere, as long as it is safe for them to do so in that environment.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Right. Thank you. How many times did that occur during the budget period?

Mike BUSH: I doubt we have that data at all over that year. I doubt we have the ability to collect it.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: You do not have the ability?

Mike BUSH: I doubt we record that. I can make inquiries, and if we do, I will provide it. But I am quite confident we do not record that data to the detail you would require.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Why would that not be recorded?

Mike BUSH: I cannot tell you.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: No worries. Thank you. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Puglielli. A point of order, Ms Benham.

Jade BENHAM: On a point of order, Chair, on personal offence, I find it incredibly offensive that members on the other side have repeatedly accused members on this side of putting words into the mouths of witnesses when all we are doing is seeking clarity, asking questions –

Michael GALEA: You have. You actually have, though. Ms Britnell has done that –

Jade BENHAM: We are seeking clarity, asking questions, and the way Mr Galea in particular has been speaking to me and my colleague to my right today I find personally offensive, when the very introduction to this hearing and inquiry on the website says that we are here to improve the accountability of Victorian government departments and agencies and improve the transparency and clarity in the reporting of the public sector.

The CHAIR: Excuse me. Ms Kathage.

Lauren KATHAGE: The rules apply to everybody. Everybody follows the rules.

Jade BENHAM: Asking questions and seeking clarity – I would ask for some balance from the Chair.

Lauren KATHAGE: I beg your pardon. What are you saying about the Chair?

The CHAIR: Excuse me. Mr Galea, on the point of order.

Michael GALEA: Further to the point of order, apart from the reflection on the Chair, the members opposite have been repeatedly flouting your rulings when it comes to relevance and when it comes to not misrepresenting witnesses in this place. They have done so repeatedly and wilfully this morning and on other days of this committee and shown great disrespect to these witnesses and other witnesses during the week. If they are unable to identify the actual timeframe that we are looking at in this inquiry, I seek leave to table a calendar of the last financial year that might assist those members to actually understand the period that we are looking at.

Jade BENHAM: Could you also please produce the standing orders which says we need to reference sources?

The CHAIR: Excuse me, Ms Benham. Do you wish to speak on a new point of order?

Jade BENHAM: Please, Chair. I would also like to note the standing order which says that members need the reference source and how clear that needs to be. We do not actually have to supply it. This is not estimates, this is outcomes. We can go by the questionnaire. We do not need to supply it. The level of wasting time from the other side and the disrespect shown to members on this side for simply seeking the clarity, transparency and accountability that is illustrated on the website I find highly offensive.

Michael GALEA: With respect to Ms Benham, I do not want to be moving points of orders against you, but you are continually flouting the rulings, and you are doing so consciously.

The CHAIR: Excuse me. I am going to rule on the point of order. Ms Benham, I will remind all members again here on this committee that they are not to put false words into the mouths of witnesses giving evidence before us. It is a reiteration and a warning to all members, not to you directly. In relation to any member putting false words into the mouths of witnesses before this committee, the reason why that is not appropriate to do is, firstly, it is not treating witnesses with the respect that they deserve, and also it risks improper, inappropriate and quite frankly wrong evidence being given to this committee that then makes up a report that is tabled in Parliament.

Jade BENHAM: I seek your guidance, Chair.

The CHAIR: I am going to rule on the point of order, and then you can seek my guidance. I do not uphold the point of order. I will continue to remind all members that they need to afford both our witnesses, each other and, Ms Benham, quite frankly, me as Chair of this committee the respect that everyone in this room deserves, including the Victorian community watching this live stream today.

Jade BENHAM: Chair, I seek your guidance. Are members permitted to ask a question seeking clarity and repeat back what they believed were the words that were heard? Is that permitted in this inquiry?

The CHAIR: Ms Benham, I will answer that, quite frankly, because I think there is a commonsense answer that everyone watching here today, including me –

Jade Benham interjected.

The CHAIR: Ms Benham, it is not an invitation for you to continue to comment on this. Seeking clarification from witnesses is entirely permissible, but putting words into their mouths that, quite frankly, I have listened to today and that they did not say, as I am listening very closely – and we can go ahead and check the Hansard transcript as it comes through. But I will not tolerate false words being put into the mouths of witnesses by those to my left and also by those to my right, and I would ask members to cease doing so. We are going to go straight to Mr Hilakari.

Mathew HILAKARI: Thank you. Secretary, officials, Chief Commissioner, I just want to take us to the questionnaire on page 139, which talks to community work and the almost 375,000 hours of community work undertaken by people supervised in the community during the 2024–25 financial year. I am hoping you could just talk to some of the types of work that are being supervised but also how that goes to people's rehabilitation.

Emma CASSAR: Yes, of course. Thank you for the question. Whilst I will make some introductory remarks, I will then throw to the Commissioner, or Emma Catford, who will be able to talk to this further. Community work has always played a really significant role in the correction space and youth justice space. It is rehabilitative, and it is a really important element of that. For the people who engage in community work, the sense of pride and the sense of achievement that they obtain through the work is a great contribution both to their wellbeing and indeed to the community. But Em, would you like to add anything to that?

Emma CATFORD: Thank you for the question. I would just echo the Secretary's comments in terms of the importance of performing and undertaking community work hours, which are of course ordered by the courts and are put on to a community corrections order for that period. As the Secretary has noted, people on community orders have committed low-risk offending, and it is to redirect them away rather than bring them into a custodial environment. We have got a terrific number of partnerships, more than 500 partners that we work with, who are able to work with the offenders that are reporting to community corrections to complete their hours. They vary from graffiti removal to, for example, a cooking program, and so the community work is not just around acquitting the obligations to the court but also an opportunity for people to learn new skills, to re-engage with the community which they have committed the offending in, and I guess take responsibility for their actions. So we do a lot in that voluntary capacity, particularly with vulnerable communities as well and food programs and things like that.

Mathew HILAKARI: So what are some of the organisations that they work with? And who undertakes that supervision role as well?

Emma CATFORD: The community correctional services team undertake that supervision, and it will vary depending on the type of community work that is being undertaken. Of course we will do risk assessments as well to make sure that the community work that someone is encouraged to complete is appropriate, and that will depend on the nature of their offending and also the number of hours that they have to complete. There are various different reporting obligations. Cohealth is one of the partners that we work with. We also work with the Mullum Mullum Indigenous Gathering Place up in the Grampians, and there are many others across the state.

Mathew HILAKARI: Do counselling or rehabilitation services add to this function as well? Or is that separate to it?

Emma CATFORD: It would probably –

Mathew HILAKARI: Or it depends on the court order maybe.

Emma CATFORD: Consider it separate. Community work hours are one condition, and on a community correction order there might be various other obligations that a person needs to attend to. Counselling might be part of that and alcohol and drug treatment, and we have a range of other programs that will work with people during the duration of their order.

Mathew HILAKARI: Okay. I just want to take us now to youth justice and the supported rehabilitative service. I will take you to budget paper 3, page 71. I am hoping we could go through the reasons, Secretary, for the decision to transition this service over the financial year to the department and what sort of benefits we expect from that transition.

Emma CASSAR: Sure. Thank you for the question. I will throw to the Commissioner, Youth Justice.

Mathew HILAKARI: Thank you so much.

Andrea DAVIDSON: Thank you, Secretary. Thank you for the question. So just to clarify, it is the statewide rehabilitation service. That is a service that is our clinical service that is responsive to criminogenic risks and needs. So those clinicians that are working within the statewide rehabilitation service are very much focused on those criminogenic treatments. Since that model has come in-house, it has continued to roll out the suite of youth offending programs that were previously delivered through Caraniche. However, the function of that team has also expanded, so it is now a fully integrated model where clinicians are working alongside our operational staff, both within our custodial settings as well as our community settings, to ensure that those youth offending programs are not just standalone and standalone criminogenic treatment, but they are actually

fully integrated into our behaviour change workforce model in custody and into our broader case management offerings and exercises within the community.

Mathew HILAKARI: What does it mean to start that work at the custodial end? Is that going to see benefits both now and over time? Because I would have thought that is a really important thing to see happening while in custody.

Andrea DAVIDSON: Yes, absolutely. So since SRS has come in-house, what it has enabled in the custodial environment is the full connection between our behaviour support specialists, our unit staff on the floor every day and our clinical staffing team. The benefit there is that it really brings to life the behaviour change workforce model, so that every staff member that is working with a young person, from the staff member that is responsible for working through their structured day, supporting them on the unit and taking them to school, all the way through to the staff that are responsible for delivering specific interventions, are fully integrated. So it means that a young person has a range of relationships which are all integrated in their focus on behaviour change for that young person.

Mathew HILAKARI: Does that go to young people on remand as well?

Andrea DAVIDSON: Yes, that is correct. That is across all young people within our custodial facilities. I think, really importantly, under the new Youth Justice Act, that SRS team is now able to deliver criminogenic interventions from the first point of contact with our system, whether that young person is in custody or on remand. One of the early proclamations within the Act was ensuring that could actually be brought forward immediately. That is a provision within the *Youth Justice Act* which is to be implemented September next year. That was a change that was brought forward, recognising the importance of young people receiving that criminogenic treatment from that first point of contact with our system.

Mathew HILAKARI: In the period prior to that being implemented, what would people on remand who are young people receive in terms of that support to exit the system?

Andrea DAVIDSON: Young people on remand were still able to engage in what we call psychosocial programs. So those are programs such as, for example, drug and alcohol focused programs and perhaps programs focused on general emotional regulation. However, what we were not able to do is look more specifically at the offending behaviour that had occurred if they were sentenced or that was alleged to have occurred and to really work more strategically around that specific behaviour at the point that it occurred or was alleged to have occurred.

Mathew HILAKARI: I will just move on to the workforce itself who are undertaking this work, and I thank them for that work, because it is really important for the safety of all Victorians. Bringing that statewide rehab service in-house – what has that meant for staff and how are they feeling about it?

Andrea DAVIDSON: It means a number of things for staff. It means that they are working alongside clinicians. So rather than just the young people having those scheduled times with clinicians, it means that our staff are able to get constant on-the-job coaching from our clinicians, and that includes our behaviour support team as well. Behaviour support is a really important team that knits together those staff that are working on the ground, the young person themselves and our clinical teams. So it has really enhanced their work, because it has allowed them, through their functional behavioural assessments, to take a truly clinical lens and integrate that into the way that we respond to the quite challenging behaviours that young people present in custody. And what we know is, if we are able to manage those behaviours and reset and build young people's skills in being able to emotionally regulate, for example, in custody, then that sets them up far better for a future once they step out of the custodial environment.

Mathew HILAKARI: Thank you for those answers. I am going to move on to the annual report on page 41, which goes to the council on bail, rehab and accountability. Secretary, through you – and I suspect we might be having some further conversations with Ms Davidson – I am just hoping we can go through how that is addressing the rise in young people committing crime and repeat offending.

Andrea DAVIDSON: Thank you, Secretary. So the Council on Bail, Rehabilitation and Accountability is a really important mechanism in terms of ensuring that across government departments – to go to earlier comments around the importance of acknowledging that community safety is not about just a justice response –

what COBRA does is draw together senior representatives from the department, Victoria Police, DFFH, DH, DE and DJISIR at either the deputy secretary level or the commissioner level, or both. Those representatives are, importantly, decision-makers with policy and operational levers to really be able to facilitate swift and effective action to respond to the opportunities for change or improvement. COBRA has met 11 times as of 11 November, and each time there has been a different focus or a different piece of work that we are collectively reviewing.

One of the important things that COBRA has been able to do is a deep dive data analysis of cohort and offending to really be able to provide an understanding as to the cohort of young people that are committing repeat offending – repeat high-harm offending – to understand the risk factors and their journey into the system. What that reveals for us is that exact story that I referenced earlier around the importance of understanding that we all have a part to play in achieving community safety and some of those red flags or concerns that have arisen quite early in young people’s lives or at the interface with other systems. That type of analysis then allows us as the COBRA group to be able to look at how we can – individually within departments but also cross-sectionally – shift our practices to respond more effectively to those young people earlier and also then truly be able to shift into a preventative space by preventing young people coming into the system. The other important part of the work that we do together is, for example, a cross-sectional audit that was conducted on programs that respond to offending. We are able to really look at all the programs across all the departments and understand how each of those is contributing and really weigh up what is the evidence that they are working, and what is the opportunity to either enhance them or consider other options.

Mathew HILAKARI: I really appreciate a focus on evidence-based accountability, because it uses the taxpayer’s money so well and gets really great outcomes. Secretary, I am going to move on to the community safety package – it is on page 3 of the annual report – and just hoping you could update the committee how this will support the implementation of bail reforms.

Emma CASSAR: Sure, is there a specific focus you would like us to take?

Mathew HILAKARI: No, I am happy to be general at the moment.

Emma CASSAR: We can go across the system. Yes, no problem at all. I will start with Marian to give that update, and then we can progress to the more operational areas, if that is helpful.

Marian CHAPMAN: Yes, are you interested in the budget funding for this?

Emma CASSAR: Funding and implementation.

Marian CHAPMAN: So in my patch in justice, because it is a bit spread between the departments –

Mathew HILAKARI: Community safety is everyone’s responsibility.

Marian CHAPMAN: Community safety is everyone’s responsibility, so it does cut across legislative reform, which sits with me, and other deputy secretaries with prevention, early intervention, police, courts and corrections, so all of the departments’ work really complements those reforms. In my patch we did a lot of legislative reform in that year to improve community safety and respond to crime trends. That includes delivery of the bail reforms – as we know, they make it harder for serious repeat offenders to be bailed; the machete ban, which we have talked about a little bit today in this committee, so I will not go into that further; and the tobacco licensing scheme and the regulator to crack down on illicit tobacco trades and organised crime, which often sits behind it. We know that effective responses to crime and keeping the community safe start with prevention – and again, we have talked about that and we have heard from the chief commissioner – but also early intervention. Work led by the department of justice includes the youth crime prevention program, which operates in 14 locations across Victoria and prioritises communities with high levels of crime. It has supported over 7500 young people since it commenced in 2016, and it connects them to case management, coaching, mentoring and prosocial activities. It has really proven to be effective in reducing offending and the severity of offending of young people, and that is a big focus at the moment, as we know.

Mathew HILAKARI: Do we have any data from the reporting period that speaks to the effectiveness of that program?

Marian CHAPMAN: I would probably refer that on to the Commissioner for Youth Justice.

Andrea DAVIDSON: Is that specifically in relation to the diversion program?

Marian CHAPMAN: Yes.

Andrea DAVIDSON: The 2024–25 year has been another year where I can report really good success across the diversion program. In 2024–25 we had 1153 diversions that were overseen by the Children’s Court youth diversion service, and there was a 98 per cent success rate across those diversion orders. I think it is important to acknowledge that that means that diversion orders are the most made order by the Children’s Court, and that that statistic obviously meets the department’s performance standards as well.

Mathew HILAKARI: And when we speak about a 98 per cent success rate, what does that mean in practical terms?

Andrea DAVIDSON: In practical terms what that means is that young people have engaged with the service and completed the diversion order to meet the criteria for completing that order. Generally that means there are a range of activities that young people may engage in through the course of diversion. A good example is if alcohol and other drugs have played a role in their contact with the justice system, there might be a requirement, similar to a full supervised order, for them to attend alcohol and other drug – that might be something they agree to through a diversion order and they complete that. There are also reparation-style activities. There are a range of options that are available to young people, and really it is about targeting and targeting early how to be able to respond to the offending and divert young people away from the system.

Mathew HILAKARI: Great. Thank you.

Emma CASSAR: Did you want a view from corrections as well?

Mathew HILAKARI: I am happy with that, thank you.

Emma CATFORD: I will start and then the Commissioner may like to add. Of course the funding that was announced to support the bail reforms earlier this year has enabled us not only to open new prison beds, and Larissa has already noted the number that we have opened, but clearly to recruit lots of additional staff as well to support that activity. We have made great progress in respect to that and recruited I think more than 1000 new prison staff –

Mathew HILAKARI: That is extraordinary.

Emma CATFORD: which is an extraordinary effort by many people.

Mathew HILAKARI: Particularly in these circumstances, with so many people looking for employees. A big shout-out to anyone who wants to join the police force of course. We would love to see more people at VicPol.

Emma CATFORD: Absolutely, and being a prison officer is equally as rewarding.

Mathew HILAKARI: Doubly so, doubly so.

Emma CATFORD: So yes, we are still looking for more people, but we have had some terrific results. That has been through a combination of different activities supported by colleagues across the department. We have had a sign-on bonus, which has certainly assisted that, and that is sort of paid out over the duration of the person’s first 12 months, and we are doing lots of other training and things like that with staff. But with respect to the number of prison beds that we have opened, I might ask the Commissioner just to talk to that again.

Larissa STRONG: I think it is just a repeat of what I said before. We have opened 1159 prison beds since the announcement of bail reform, at a time that we have been also recruiting. Recruitment has been very successful, and we thank our colleagues in people and culture for their support in that component. The initiatives to do with the sign-on bonus and also the marketing for jobs are working. We also got funded through the community safety package, as the Deputy Secretary mentioned, for additional training. We will have an additional day of pre-service training for de-escalation: how do you use your voice as the first form of

de-escalation, interpersonal skills and defusing situations as your first tactical options. The other funding we got was for safer skills to also be embedded in our pre-service training. That is really working with people who have complex presentations in response to mental health and disability and giving officers the skills about understanding the different presentations that they do experience in their very rewarding day-to-day jobs.

The other thing that we were very pleased about is we were funded to receive some safety managers across our maximum-security prisons who will work directly with general managers of prisons. Those roles will have a real focus on analysing, going to root-cause analysis, all prisoner-on-staff assaults; working with the workforce about what we can do differently; and action plans and ensuring we are implementing action plans as a key priority of ours also as we experience increasing population and increasing remand population. That is where we are at in terms of our community safety package, as well as the additional beds that we got funded that will come online towards the end of this year and early next year as well.

Mathew HILAKARI: Secretary, I should correct the record. We equally value everybody who works across the Department of Justice and Community Services. Everybody is equally valued for their important work.

Emma CASSAR: I cannot argue with that with the police commissioner sitting next to me.

Mathew HILAKARI: I will just take us to another equally valued area, the Victorian Institute of Forensic Medicine, on page 24 of the questionnaire. We talked about the enhancement of forensic capability. I am just hoping to talk through what has been delivered over the 2024–25 year.

Emma CASSAR: Certainly, and I will throw to Marian Chapman.

Marian CHAPMAN: The Victorian Institute of Forensic Medicine is a really critical part in the justice system. As we know, it provides independent forensic, medical and scientific services to support families, communities and the justice system. It delivers the Donor Tissue Bank that provides safe tissues to medical specialists and Victorian hospitals for transplant services and for medical research. It provides evidence in criminal proceedings to support the criminal justice process. It investigates deaths reported to the coroner. It examines alleged offenders and medically assesses and supports victims of crime. There has been a lot of work very recently completed for infrastructure upgrades at VIFM.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Chapman, Mr Hilakari. Secretary, Chief Commissioner, thank you very much for appearing before the committee today. The committee will follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing, and Secretary, I do remind you that responses are required within five working days of the committee's request.

The committee is going to take a break before beginning its consideration of the Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions at 1:30 pm.

I declare this hearing adjourned.

Witnesses withdrew.