

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

2021–22 Budget Estimates

Melbourne—Wednesday, 30 June 2021

MEMBERS

Ms Lizzie Blandthorn—Chair

Mr Richard Riordan—Deputy Chair

Mr Sam Hibbins

Mr David Limbrick

Mr Gary Maas

Mr James Newbury

Mr Danny O’Brien

Ms Pauline Richards

Mr Tim Richardson

Ms Nina Taylor

WITNESSES

Ms Jaclyn Symes, MLC, Attorney-General,

Ms Rebecca Falkingham, Secretary,

Mr Sam Porter, Deputy Secretary, Justice Policy and Data Reform,

Mr Craig Howard, Deputy Secretary, Fines, Registration and Crime Prevention, and

Mr Andrew Campbell, Deputy Secretary, Corporate Governance and Support, Department of Justice and Community Safety; and

Ms Louise Anderson, Chief Executive Officer, Court Services Victoria.

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

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

On behalf of the Parliament, the committee is conducting this Inquiry into the 2021–22 Budget Estimates. Its aim is to scrutinise public administration and finance to improve outcomes for the Victorian community.

Please note that witnesses and members may remove their masks when speaking to the committee but must replace them afterwards. All mobile telephones and computers should be turned to silent.

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

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

We welcome Minister Symes, in the first instance as the Attorney-General. We invite you to make a 10-minute presentation, and this will be followed by questions from the committee.

Ms SYMES: Thank you so much, Chair. And good morning, committee. I too would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners, paying my deep personal respects to elders past, present and emerging. I acknowledge that it is your last day, so congratulations on the effort to date. It is a mammoth committee, and I commend your work.

As members would be aware, I have had the honour of leading the justice portfolio for six months now as Attorney-General. I think Mr Riordan and I exchanged a conversation about this eventual possibility the last time I was before this committee in my previous portfolio. It has been a wonderful six months coming back to the justice portfolio.

Of course the impact of the global pandemic continues to be an enormous test, but the commitment I have seen since day one of this role has been everyone supporting the delivery of justice services, and it should give the community such confidence. We are pursuing a strong justice agenda that is not only adapting and responding to the immediate challenges of the pandemic but also delivering significant reform, focused on building a fairer, more responsive justice system that works for all Victorians. This commitment is clear from our \$700 million investment as part of the 2021–22 budget to support service delivery, improve outcomes and restore community confidence in the justice system.

The government has worked really closely with the courts, and I am pleased to be joined by the CEO of CSV, Louise Anderson, today and of course members from the justice department. The courts have adapted to the challenges of the pandemic and are making attempts to respond to backlogs through using the first phase of the government's justice recovery plan. This work includes technology upgrades across courts and VCAT to allow for service continuity during the pandemic. We are expanding the evidence-based Drug Court to regional Victoria, including Shepparton and Ballarat. The court-integrated support program is also underway in the

Magistrates Court and County Court. This program is amazing—it provides individual, tailored case management with quicker access to services that address underlying behaviours that cause offending and indeed reduce reoffending. We are delivering new law courts in Bendigo and Wyndham and updating the Sunshine law courts to better protect victim-survivors and further acquit the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Family Violence. We have also established specialist family violence courts in Shepparton, Ballarat, Moorabbin, Heidelberg and Frankston, and VCAT has opened three new community-based venues in Oakleigh, Frankston and Bundoora, providing that important access to justice outside of the CBD. And the justice legislation amendments that passed the Parliament this year extend and embed several reforms that were developed in response to the pandemic to support the effective and efficient functioning of the justice system but now have brought those practices into permanency and provide inevitable modernisation.

A major component of the commitment in relation to the budget has been on delivering a more effective, efficient and accessible justice system. \$210 million was invested to continue recovery costs to the Victorian justice system, to help drive down court backlogs and increase efficiency in courts across our state. This \$200 million has been invested to reduce wait times in courts and VCAT through extra resources, including more remote hearing services and additional judicial officers and court support staff. Specific initiatives have included an upgrade to VCAT's digital infrastructure, including its case management system; \$40 million to expand the online Magistrates Court, with new magistrates to hear and finalise more matters; \$34 million for additional judges, judicial registrars, court staff and important wellbeing programs; and more than \$20 million to continue innovative programs in the Children's Court and active case management in the Supreme Court and County Court, which are certainly going to help services for victims. While there is always work to do in addressing the backlogs in our courts, recent data has shown that the system is starting to recover, with the total number of pending cases across Victorian courts and VCAT reducing by around 2 per cent in May of this year month on month.

We are also providing the OPP with more than \$50 million to support efficient prosecution and resolution of matters, greater use of digital evidence and providing specialist assistance for victims and witnesses. \$3.9 million is also included for a new program in the Children's Court, the disability access referral team, to provide targeted pathway referrals for young people with a disability.

A key pillar of our justice agenda is of course strengthening support for victim-survivors. The roll-out of specialist family violence courts to all headquarter courts across the state will continue thanks to a further \$77.6 million, and a further three will be delivered through the Bendigo, Wyndham and Sunshine court buildings. A \$4.5 million package will support victim-survivors of family violence to get legal assistance through the Orange Door Network, and perpetrators will be held to account with investment in intervention programs that focus on behavioural change. The justice system will also be able to better respond to family violence, with more investment in family violence practice leads and embedding the multi-agency risk assessment and management framework. We are continuing to support the protection of children and people with disability, with \$33.2 million to support the important work at Working with Children Check Victoria and the recently introduced NDIS worker screening scheme, which started in February this year.

We certainly know that there is a lot of work to do to close the gap and create better outcomes for Aboriginal Victorians, including through our justice system. I am proud to be part of a government that is tackling this issue, taking a whole-of-government approach and is truly committed to seeing through self-determination and reconciliation with Aboriginal people in this state. As part of our record investment in Aboriginal affairs this year, the Victorian government is delivering vital programs to improve fairness and access to support for Aboriginal Victorians, providing \$33.1 million towards preventing Aboriginal deaths in custody, which of course will deliver a range of targeted improvements such as the continuation of after-hours family violence support through Djirra Aboriginal women's legal service and Dardi Munwurro; the operation of Ngarra Jarranounith, a place for Aboriginal men that focuses on tackling recidivism and reducing the use of violence by Aboriginal men; expanding the Baroona Youth Healing program; and a new 20-bed Aboriginal healing unit at the Dame Phyllis Frost Centre to improve rehabilitation through culturally appropriate healing models.

We are also investing in reforms and services that will improve fairness and access to justice and provide better outcomes for Victorians by providing more than \$31 million for legal assistance and early intervention support services and funding for community legal centres and legal aid. We are also establishing the civil response scheme to respond to the significant reforms that we made through the *Change or Suppression (Conversion) Practices Prohibition Act 2021*. The establishment of the spent convictions scheme is underway to open up

greater opportunities for reintegration and rehabilitation for Victorians impacted by minor historic convictions, and \$93 million to ensure that VIFM remains a leader in forensic medicine and delivers essential services to the justice system.

We remain committed to implementing all of the recommendations from the Royal Commission into the Management of Police Informants and, through this work, to improve trust and community confidence in the justice system. It is why we have allocated \$87.9 million to support this important work and ensure that the events that led to the commission can never happen again. We have appointed an implementation monitor and progress is well underway across all agencies, with five of the 54 recommendations that have been directed to the Victorian government already delivered and another 14 on track for delivery this year.

So, certainly despite COVID-19 disruptions, we are focused on continuing to help Victorians get the justice they seek, keeping the community safe, supporting victim-survivors and addressing the drivers of crime while supporting offenders with early intervention and rehabilitation. This year's budget investments will help support the justice system to recover from COVID, delivering a justice system that is fairer, more responsive and provides better outcomes for all Victorians.

That is my presentation, Chair. I am happy to take any questions from the committee.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Attorney-General. Deputy Chair.

Mr RIORDAN: Thank you, Chair. Good morning, Minister. Welcome back in your new role. I want to move to Magistrates Court resourcing, and Attorney, I refer to budget paper 3, page 134, that deals with resourcing of the backlog in our courts. I further want to discuss the disturbing recent media reports involving Magistrate Rodney Higgins, a two-time failed Labor candidate and now we see superannuation claimant opportunist, in which he has allegedly and pre-emptively indicated that he will serve as a reserve magistrate following his pending compulsory retirement as a magistrate. Should Victorians question former Attorney-General Martin Pakula in making the appointment of Mr Higgins as a magistrate, or was his appointment a political Labor payback appointment?

Ms SYMES: Thank you, Mr Riordan, for your question. You have raised a variety of issues, from Magistrates Court backlogs to a particular appointment and issues surrounding that.

Mr RIORDAN: Specifically the question refers to the use of dubious magistrates in the quest to catch up on the backlog. Is that—

Mr MAAS: On a point of order, Chair, I was really wondering what the budget paper reference was, but putting that to one side, if the question goes to a specific—

Mr NEWBURY: It is going to be a long day.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury! Sorry, Mr Maas, I cannot hear you over Mr Newbury, who has started the day screaming.

Mr NEWBURY: Do not use poisonous language, Chair. Do not use poisonous, lying language, Labor Chair.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, committee members should not have to scream over the top of you screaming. If you could please just—

Mr NEWBURY: Please stop using that language, Chair.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, if you could please desist.

Mr NEWBURY: Please stop using that language, Chair.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, can you desist, please? Mr Maas.

Mr MAAS: Thank you. Look, given that that is the specific question that Mr Riordan is asking, which goes to the appointment on the Magistrates Court, I do not believe it falls within the scope of the inquiry and I do not think the question should be allowed.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

Mr RICHARDSON: Further to the point of order, Chair, I do not know if we need to take advice from the clerks, but reflecting on the judiciary directly—what advice do we have?

Mr RIORDAN: No, my question was specific—

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, you can contribute in a moment.

Mr RICHARDSON: Well, privilege is one thing, but reflecting on the judiciary, which we have been cautioned and warned about before in discussions of a range of Bills and matters—so I just would ask advice—

Mr RIORDAN: Can we stop the clock, please, Chair?

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, you will have an opportunity to contribute if you want to.

Mr RIORDAN: Stop the clock.

Mr RICHARDSON: Reflecting on the judiciary and members of the judiciary who are currently serving, regardless of who they are, I think is dangerous territory, and we might need to take advice from the clerks on whether that falls within the remits or scope of what we are doing as PAEC members.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Richardson. Mr Riordan, would you like to contribute on the point of order?

Mr RIORDAN: Yes, I will contribute. This is a disgusting waste of time by Labor to sort of stall out the time. The question is completely legitimate. The Attorney-General now has a choice: will she be using this man's services?

Mr RICHARDSON: What is the budget paper reference?

Mr RIORDAN: Will the Attorney be using this man's services to plug up the huge delay in the Magistrates Court?

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, contributing on the point of order is not an opportunity to reiterate your question. There were elements of your question that were within scope in relation to the budget and estimates—

Mr RIORDAN: So which bits do you disagree with? He is a two-time failed Labor candidate or a superannuation claimant fraud?

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, could you please stop speaking over the Chair? I would ask that you keep your question to the budget estimates that are the scope of this inquiry. There were elements of your question that were within scope and there were elements that I would think that you would know went well beyond the scope of this inquiry. If you could please put your question to the Attorney-General within the scope of the inquiry, that would be appreciated.

Mr RIORDAN: Okay, we will leave that question and we will move on. Minister, are there other appointments like Mr Higgins that are of a dubious nature that you will be calling on for those people's services to help with the backlog in the Magistrates Court?

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, I would again ask you to relate your question to the estimates, please.

Mr RIORDAN: Yes, it is quite clear. We have had a presentation on the huge backlog in the court system. My question is: will this Attorney be using the services of this particular magistrate or any others who have dubious track records in order to get through the court backlog?

Ms SYMES: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Mr Riordan, for your questions. It is important to ensure that we are providing resources to the courts, particularly the Magistrates Court, our busiest court in the state, to ensure that they can get through the backlogs that have been a result of the COVID pandemic. When it comes to judicial conduct and judicial appointments, all judicial officers indeed have a duty to act with the utmost integrity and must enjoy the trust and confidence of the public. You have raised issues around the appointments of reserve magistrates, and I think it would be important to address your specific concerns in relation to an

individual. I do not want to provide too much commentary or an opinion on the matters of the magistrate that you referred to, but in—

Mr RIORDAN: So you will not be ruling out this particular magistrate?

Ms SYMES: In general, reserve magistrates are appointed by the Governor in Council under section 9A of the *Magistrates' Court Act* to support the good functioning of the court. The Magistrates Court has not made a request for Magistrate Higgins to be appointed as a reserve judge, and I do not expect that request to be made.

Mr RIORDAN: Okay. Thank you. Moving on, are you aware of any reports, reviews, court findings or any other reference that has questioned the appointment of magistrates such as Magistrate Higgins?

Ms SYMES: Not specifically, Mr Riordan, but when it comes to complaints about magistrates, you can refer those to the judicial commission. The commission can review the complaints. Any member of the public in fact can make a complaint to the commission, and therefore if you have any specific concerns—

Mr RIORDAN: I am specifically referring to any official findings within your own court system that have found poorly against the appointment of judicial officers. Have you received any reports of that nature since you been in the office?

Ms SYMES: In my time no judges have had—

Mr RIORDAN: Or magistrates, or coroners—

Ms SYMES: Any judicial appointments. There has been certainly the judicial commission look at complaints, and I have been briefed on those, but there has been no adverse finding to the extent that has called on the government to consider removal, for example.

Mr RIORDAN: What if the magistrate was no longer working but the appointment itself was called into question? Has that been brought to your attention?

Ms RICHARDS: On a point of order, Chair, I am still trying to follow along with where this relates to the scope of this inquiry. It seems like a fishing expedition, and it is just not clear to me how this comes back to—

Mr Newbury interjected.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, I cannot hear Ms Richards over—

Mr Newbury interjected.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, I cannot hear Ms Richards over your interjections, please.

Mr RICHARDSON: On a point of order, Chair, I ask that the Member for Brighton withdraw that slur on the Member for Cranbourne.

Mr Newbury interjected.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury!

Mr RICHARDSON: You cannot reflect on members. You can conduct yourself the way you see fit, but you cannot reflect on other members of the committee. This is a committee of the Parliament, and I ask you to withdraw.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I did not hear the slur. But if the Member for Brighton interjected with a slur that cast aspersions on the Member for Cranbourne, I would ask that he do the decent thing and withdraw it.

Mr NEWBURY: I withdraw.

The CHAIR: Thank you. On the point of order, I would ask that the Deputy Chair keep his questions within the scope of this inquiry. We have discussed this already this morning. I do not want to delay, but I would ask that you relate your questions to the budget.

Mr RIORDAN: I will again refer Ms Richards, who seems to be having difficulty following the fact that we have a major backlog problem in the court system here in Victoria, which both the minister has spoken about and page 134 refers to. I am simply trying to ascertain what systems this government has in place to make sure that the extrajudicial staff that they will be calling on are of the highest repute and that the system and Victorians can in fact have complete confidence in the appointment process that this government undertakes.

Ms SYMES: Mr Riordan—

The CHAIR: Thank you, Deputy Chair. I am sorry to interrupt, Attorney, but the Deputy Chair's time has expired. I will pass the call to Mr Maas.

Mr MAAS: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Attorney, for your appearance this morning along with the departmental team as well. I would like to try and elicit some evidence that we will actually be able to use for the report that we are producing after this inquiry, and to that end, I would like to go to backlogs in our court system—

Mr RIORDAN: Point of order! Point of order! Oh, backlog—you cannot talk about that!

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Maas.

Mr MAAS: So there is not a point of order? Okay. If I can take you to budget paper 3 at pages 89 and 133, I was hoping that you would be able to explain how investment into justice recovery and court resources will help reduce the court backlog caused by the pandemic.

Ms SYMES: Thank you so much, Mr Maas, for your question. Indeed the pandemic has caused disruption across the state and across the world, and courts have not been immune to that. I certainly have not shied away from acknowledging that there are issues and therefore it is really important that we address them front on in conjunction with the hardworking people from the courts, and we are certainly focused on the task. As Attorney-General, in December, I can say, as I think I alluded to in my presentation, I was immediately impressed by the way courts and tribunals responded to the pandemic, adopted new technologies and really pivoted their practices to virtual delivery of justice and really being nimble in their way of ensuring that Victorians can access justice and the cases can continue. They are doing a great job in responding to the challenges, and they have been demonstrated to be efficient and effective in pretty difficult times. Importantly, we have wanted to be able to support faster and more flexible justice systems being able to respond to the needs of the community.

The courts told us what funding and resources and staff they needed. Of course, our budget process allows for the courts to provide effectively bids for government's consideration, and indeed the obvious focus from the courts was to deal with backlogs and to keep some of the new practices that were learned over the pandemic going. The funding provided in this year's budget builds on last year's budget, which the committee would have been briefed on, in relation to the justice recovery plan, all about supportive innovative, quick responses to backlogs and to continue to keep justice moving.

Some of the changes in response to the pandemic are now here for the long term. I guess it has been a practice of things that would probably have happened in five or 10 years anyway and now are being forced to happen, and the courts have been amazing in really responding to the new challenges and adopting those. There was nearly \$81 million in last year's budget and this year there was \$210 million specifically targeted at backlogs. We certainly know that court is the last place that many Victorians actually want to be, but the funding will help reduce wait times in courts and cut down on delay, distress and uncertainty. We certainly want to make sure that we can get cases dealt with quickly, particularly for victims, as the longer you wait for justice is obviously compounding the trauma that you may have experienced.

The 2021–22 budget includes funding for new case management programs, more online services and importantly, going to some of Mr Riordan's points, appointing additional magistrates and additional judges so that you have got more people to get through the cases that are waiting to be heard. Indeed there is really good work on early intervention and support for case management, because there are a lot of cases that, if people have the right information and the right support, might not necessarily have to actually result in court. So it has been a busy time, but everyone is very focused. The data is starting to trend downwards, but we have still got a lot of work to do.

Mr MAAS: Okay, thank you. Judicial wellbeing, of course, is incredibly important throughout this time, and without actually naming judicial appointments, I would just like to know what the government is doing to support members of our judiciary in the court system, including in response to increased pressure on judges as a result of the pandemic.

Ms SYMES: Yes, look, it is a good question. Mental health is obviously a big issue for the community. It is an issue that our government has certainly acknowledged through the royal commission and obviously the recommendations that we have agreed to implement. We have a whole-of-government approach to improving the mental health outcomes of all Victorians, but this is a particular issue in the courts. The mental stress that judicial officers and court staff experience is in many ways quite unique. They need to be specifically and specially supported so that they can successfully continue in their important work for the effective operation of the court system. The Chief Magistrate of the Magistrates Court has recently highlighted the high stress levels faced by magistrates who work nearly every day with people that are often at crisis points in their own lives, so they are witness to some pretty confronting things. I am pleased to note that the 2021–22 budget provides \$3 million for the Magistrates Court to expand its health and wellbeing programs for judicial officers and staff, and this includes a peer-to-peer support and supervision program as well as e-learning modules and mental health and wellbeing training for judicial officers.

We are investing in judicial wellbeing in other courts as well. The staff at the Coroners Court of Victoria, as you could imagine, face daily and prolonged exposure to extremely traumatic information, images, interactions and indeed distressed family members. Our response to increasing pressure in Victoria's justice system provides \$1.5 million over four years for training, support and counselling to address the health and safety risks in the work undertaken by the Coroners Court of Victoria and their staff. The Coroners Court has prioritised significant investments in staff wellbeing recently, including the delivery of a comprehensive health and wellbeing plan, and will continue to promote a safe work environment to protect the health and safety of all that come into contact with the court.

Mr MAAS: Thanks, Attorney. What about the use of technology in trying to help reduce the backlog? How is that being used to reduce the backlog in our court system?

Ms SYMES: I think a bit like all of us adapting our work practices and becoming more digitally savvy, the courts have really taken this on with gusto. Online hearings have been a central part of the court's response to the restrictions that were a result of the pandemic. Online hearings have allowed judges and parties and witnesses to participate in the court process obviously without having to be physically present at a courthouse. The ability to hold hearings remotely has certainly been critical in ensuring continued access to justice during the pandemic while also, importantly, ensuring the safety of judicial officers, court staff and any members of the public that may have to have court matters dealt with. The experience of our courts and tribunals has shown that online hearings have certainly delivered benefits for participants in the system more broadly, and that goes to the point I was making earlier about some of these practices being embedded permanently.

Virtual hearings, for instance, can save time, including travel time and waiting times for in-person hearings, and can make the process much more convenient for participants. Virtual hearings have also had benefits for vulnerable persons who prefer not to attend the courthouse in person. Not all cases can be heard remotely, but we did hear positive reports from family violence matters, for instance, where often complainants, victims, who have their matters heard at court have family obligations—it is difficult to get child care—so as long as they have got access to the facilities, the reports from those that were participating were very positive, that they could fit it into their life and it made it a lot less stressful.

Certainly it is these types of adaptations that mean fairer and more accessible justice, particularly for those in the regions, saving many having to travel down to Melbourne or indeed some other regional courts. Obviously there is not a court in every town in Victoria. In that regard I am certainly pleased to report that the budget funded further support for online hearings for our courts and tribunals. One example is the online Magistrates Court, which enables remote hearings on matters in the criminal, civil and specialist court jurisdictions, and the budget provides more than \$40 million for the online court. And that has also gone towards two new magistrates, who will preside over many of those matters.

There has also been investment in VCAT. VCAT has had a quite antiquated system for a long time, predominantly based on paper files, so indeed investment in that court to enable them to become more digitalised has been an important overdue investment brought forward as the pandemic required.

Mr MAAS: Okay. And in the 40-odd seconds I have left, the Children's Court—what about reducing the backlog there?

Ms SYMES: A fantastic outcome of the budget was four new judicial registrars. Registrars are court appointments that perform similar jobs to a judge, can deal with some of the lower level matters, deal with the admin and really get the place cracking in relation to all of those matters that can be dealt with without necessarily the contested hearings that the judges might hear. It was the first time that we have had judicial registrars appointed. I am pleased to say that they have started recently, and I am looking forward to getting down there and chatting to them about how their work is going.

Mr MAAS: Thanks, Attorney. Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Maas. Mr Hibbins.

Mr HIBBINS: Thanks, Chair. Thank you, Minister and your team, for appearing this morning. One of the departmental objectives is:

A fair and accessible justice system that supports confidence in the Victorian community—

and in fact you are spending around \$212 million under that for 'Justice Policy, Services and Law Reform'. Your government's justice policies and bail reforms have actually resulted in a significantly higher number of prisoners on remand, poor prison performance and higher reoffending levels. Now, there was an article recently in the *Age* that actually indicated that the government was working on bail reform but that it had been put on ice until after the next election. Is the government currently working on bail reform? What is the status of that?

Ms SYMES: Yes. I thank you, Mr Hibbins, for your question. Of course bail is an important and integral component of the justice system. It allows accused persons in appropriate cases to remain in the community while waiting for charges against them to be heard. Bail is a balancing act: it is about a person's right to the presumption of innocence against the important need to protect the community. When deciding to grant bail to an accused person courts and others must take into account the risks of them remaining in the community—will they try and abscond, will they try to interfere with witnesses or will they reoffend? It is fair to say that our bail laws from last term certainly made changes. They required decision-makers to put community safety at the centre of decisions that they make, and we certainly make no apologies for having that objective.

In relation to further reforms, nothing in the justice portfolio is on ice, Mr Hibbins. It is a portfolio where we are always responding to community sentiment, we are always responding to stakeholders. You would be well aware of and have probably met with the same stakeholders that I have in relation to concerns about some of the impacts of bail on some vulnerable cohorts, and this is a matter that I will continue to have conversations about. But again, I do not make any apologies for a system that has at its very centre community safety.

Mr HIBBINS: Thanks, Minister. I am not asking you to apologise, but I know that you did receive—there has been a letter from the Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service that was endorsed by over 50 Aboriginal legal and academic groups, which states that:

We, the undersigned, demand that the Victorian Government immediately begin the process of implementing the necessary legislative reforms to undo the failed policy of its punitive bail laws, which disproportionately impact on Aboriginal people, especially women, many of whom are victim-survivors of domestic and family violence.

Will you be responding to that open letter?

Ms SYMES: Of course, Mr Hibbins. A lot of the signatories to that letter I have certainly already met with, and that is part of my role as Attorney-General. I have certainly made it known and a commitment that I am open to meeting. There are a lot of stakeholders in this portfolio, but I am getting through them, and I think I have met with the vast majority of those. Of course they raise issues in relation to future reform that they would like to see happen. I cannot give guarantees on acquitting everything that everybody asks for, but I am certainly always ready and stand ready to respond to those concerns. There is the justice partnership agreement that is a

sort of formal process that can work through the issues in the letter. But indeed I do respond to these issues and have had these conversations with those individual organisations.

Mr HIBBINS: Okay. Thank you, Minister. I understand that previously the government had promised to provide annual reporting on the implementation of the royal commission into deaths in custody, but I have not seen any annual reporting to date. Is that something that the government is intending to do?

Ms SYMES: Thank you, Mr Hibbins. I have just conferred with the Secretary of the department of justice, and that is a matter that the Minister for Corrections is responsible for. You might be better directing her a question about specific timing in relation to that, but there are reports that are provided.

Mr HIBBINS: Okay. Thank you. I will just ask about the Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service, and in fact—and this is a question that I have put to previous ministers—they are now currently having to put a freeze on taking new criminal and family law clients for at least three months to reduce the case load on lawyers and maintain the quality of their legal service. How is the government going to address this to ensure that VALS can continue to actually meet the needs of the Indigenous community?

Ms SYMES: Thank you, Mr Hibbins. I would commence my answer to your question in relation to VALS funding in particular just to point out that this year's budget, which I was particularly proud of, invested \$448 million for Aboriginal people and statewide healing, including \$98 million in commitments to self-determination, truth and treaty alone. VALS is certainly an important partner of government in the delivery of culturally safe legal services for Aboriginal people, and it is certainly reflected in the fact that it receives funding from both the commonwealth and state governments to provide a range of legal and non-legal services. Victoria provides VALS with funding for culturally appropriate legal services in the areas of family violence, Aboriginal community justice panels, youth legal service, Aboriginal women's traditional housing and Koori Courts, and VALS also receive ongoing funding under the National Legal Assistance Partnership for provision of legal assistance services in both commonwealth and state jurisdictions—and you would appreciate that the family law court is certainly a commonwealth jurisdiction.

We are keen to work with VALS on advancing their place-based delivery model, and this was particularly what they sought funding for in the budget. They did receive \$2 million of new funding for a pilot program to establish the first of their new centres, and we hope that that lays the necessary groundwork for further expansion across the state. It is certainly their priority, and they have met with me in relation to this. We are not cutting any funding to VALS. VALS receives funding, as I have said, from us and the commonwealth. There has been one-off funding, for example, for COVID and for bushfire response, and there has certainly been no reduction in VALS base funding—

Mr HIBBINS: Except that the issue is actually increased demand on their services.

Ms SYMES: Well, there is increased demand across the justice system, particularly as a result of COVID, and we are continuing to support VALS in their important work supporting Aboriginal legal services in Victoria. I have got a breakdown of all of their funding for 2021–22 across both state and commonwealth, and that is almost \$10 million. And as many agencies and non-government agencies are doing important work in the justice system they will continue to identify their budget priorities, and we will work with them on those.

Mr HIBBINS: Thank you. Just finally, I believe we might have discussed this issue before but it is the use of body-worn camera evidence at civil trials. Is that something that the government is currently ensuring can occur?

Ms FALKINGHAM: Thanks, Mr Hibbins. Yes, we are continuing to look at that issue and will be reporting later this year on those matters.

Mr HIBBINS: Thank you. Thanks, Chair.

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

Mr D O'BRIEN: Thank you, Chair. Good morning, Attorney and colleagues. Can I refer you to BP4, page 94, which has a line item there, 'Technology and resources to support Victoria's fines system'. This was the project announced in the previous budget, but again the footnote in this year's budget highlights:

Funding is not reported at this time as commercial arrangements are still to be finalised ...

and all the funding is 'tbc'. Why hasn't this line item budgeted cost been finalised, and why is it taking so long?

Ms SYMES: Thank you, Mr O'Brien, for your interest in the fines system in Victoria. It obviously plays a very important role in relation to the functioning of good governance. The fines reform project has been plagued by issues. There is a VAGO report—it certainly goes to these—and I am not making apologies for what has happened. My role is now to help manage the recovery, and it is fair to say that the fines system is working. It is functioning in terms of that it is processing fines.

Mr D O'BRIEN: You would not say it is perfect, would you?

Ms SYMES: It is a really complex system. It deals with over 120 partner agencies, 60 system interface and improvements to ensure fair and flexible options for Victorians who receive a fine. I have got to say, when I first came into the portfolio, everyone knew—it had been well publicised—the challenges that the system had experienced, and it is fair to say that when I was briefed I did not really comprehend how complex this is. It is a system that has to try and pick up local government, police, courts and, as I said, partner agencies—fishing. It is trying to create a bespoke system. But in response to your specific—

Mr D O'BRIEN: So going back to the question—

Ms SYMES: Yes, sorry. In response to your specific question, these are still commercial arrangements that are being worked through, which is why it is not a specific line item, as you have identified.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Yes, the budget says that, but I am trying to work out why. As you said, this has been a long, ongoing process. This particular project, funded last year, was also 'tbc'. How much extra is it going to cost Victorian taxpayers to get this fixed, noting that the former project blew out by \$20 million, or 47 per cent? We are just trying to get a sense of what actually it is going to end up costing us.

Ms SYMES: Mr O'Brien, we have certainly done a significant amount of work with the vendor to deliver improvements, and we certainly want the state to have value for money of course. That is an objective that we are striving for. The original budget of the VIEW system was \$46 million. To date, the capital expenditure on the fines IT system is around \$63 million. As I have identified, it is a complex task. I am confident we are on the right track. It is something that I am regularly briefed on. Obviously we have the VAGO report that provides recommendations to government. I would be happy to ask Secretary Falkingham to supplement my answer, given this has been an ongoing issue that she has had some experience in.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Well, I am happy to go to the Secretary, but perhaps can I also add: there were external contractors involved in this, in the bungling of this, so why is the Victorian taxpayer being asked to cough up more to get it fixed? Why don't we have warranty indemnity for some of these issues? Or do we?

Ms FALKINGHAM: Thanks, Mr O'Brien, for your question, and it is an important one. Obviously we have been working closely with Civica to hold them to account for what they said that they would in fact deliver. You would understand now, as the Attorney has pointed out, we have end-to-end systems in place. The work we are doing now goes to the original intent, you will recall, of the objective of modernising the fines system to make sure that we have got the right supports in place for the most vulnerable in our communities to ensure they can pay their fines. The funding we have received in this year's budget goes to that future modernisation and the technology and resources for additional concepts and components of the program.

As the Attorney said, we are in commercial negotiations, and that also goes to the issue of working with Civica about what they have failed to provide and how we can ensure rectification of those works. I can assure you DJCS has worked very, very hard with that provider to go back over contracts and to look at what they promised to deliver and have not delivered. But as you would understand, to go to the VAGO report, there are a whole lot of things in terms of specifications that were not clear at the time that we have to work through to make sure we get right for the future. So as soon as we have given a commitment, as soon as those commercial negotiations are finished, we will be transparent and open about how they have landed and what the final costs of that program are.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Is there a legal dispute underway over the terms of the contract, or is it just being negotiated?

Ms FALKINGHAM: I cannot speak to that, because that is part of the commercial negotiations at the moment.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Well, surely you can say whether there is a legal dispute or not, whether there is a dispute.

Ms FALKINGHAM: It is a dispute in relation to the contractual arrangements in terms of what Civica has provided and has not provided. So obviously it is critical that they continue to maintain the end-to-end system we currently have. We do not want any more disruption for the Victorian community in relation to the system, which is why we continue to work with them to make sure that any future provider is able to continue that system but also modernise it at the same time.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Okay. Just a quick one. Is there funding in contingency then for this?

Ms FALKINGHAM: There is, Mr O'Brien, yes.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Yes. Thank you. Can I move on to BP3, page 133, 'Court Services Victoria', and the reference to the Royal Commission into the Management of Police Informants, Attorney-General. A critical recommendation of the royal commission was the appointment of a special investigator. The government's delay in appointing a special investigator could potentially lead to evidence that becomes stale, and the opportunity may be lost to pursue certain matters that came up in that, particularly with the critical evidence. Why has this been delayed? Why has the appointment of a special investigator been delayed?

Ms SYMES: Good news for you, Mr O'Brien. The government has appointed a special investigator in recent days. So—

Mr D O'BRIEN: Are you announcing that right now, Attorney-General?

Ms SYMES: Yes, I can. I can. Justice Nettle—

Mr D O'BRIEN: How convenient for you.

Ms SYMES: Justice Nettle has accepted this important role.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Who is it, sorry?

Ms SYMES: Justice Nettle, a former High Court judge, very eminent, very esteemed, has experience in—I am trying to find his CV for you.

Mr D O'BRIEN: That is okay. I do not need it.

Ms SYMES: No. He is going to be fantastic. And you are right. It is an important role. It is something that the budget has provided \$13.5 million for. He will be setting up an office. We anticipate that this is a role that will be ongoing for approximately five years. He is a retired High Court judge that is certainly looking forward to a challenge, tells me he is not quite ready for retirement yet. So as you have certainly raised a question about the special investigator, it might be a good time just to briefly go through what that role would—

Mr D O'BRIEN: Can I perhaps ask the questions?

Ms SYMES: I will let you ask the question, hey.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Thank you. I think this is the first time I have ever actually got an answer directly responding to a question in PAEC that addresses the issue. Who will be staffing his office? Obviously \$13.5 million over four years, is it, for the special investigator's office?

Ms SYMES: Yes. The estimates has over four years. It is a complex job, and you do not know what you do not know.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Well, and I guess the question that I really want to get to is obviously police are deeply involved in this whole scenario, so where will he be sourcing support and investigators from?

Ms SYMES: Yes. It is a good question. He wants to work with the department in relation to recruitment. Of course one of the challenges is the extent of the topics that were covered by the royal commission means that there are a lot of people in justice land that are conflicted. So that will obviously be something that both he and the department are well aware of and will take steps to mitigate.

Mr D O'BRIEN: With respect, will they be recruiting from interstate and overseas?

Ms SYMES: Certainly recruitment would be seeking to avoid all conflicts of interest and indeed perceived conflicts of interest, and I anticipate that interstate and even international recruitment processes would be undertaken.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Okay. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Richards.

Ms RICHARDS: Thank you, Attorney and staff. I always like making Mr O'Brien happy, so I am going to continue on with some questions about the royal commission into police informants. I refer you to budget paper 3, page 94, and the funding detailed in relation to the Royal Commission into the Management of Police Informants, I should say. Can you please, for the benefit of the committee, explain how this funding is supporting the government's implementation of the recommendations made by the royal commission?

Ms SYMES: Yes. Thank you, Ms Richards, for your question. It is an important one. These are matters that go to the very heart of the Victorian criminal justice system. The Royal Commission into the Management of Police Informants did undertake an extensive and detailed inquiry that uncovered significant historical shortfalls in the criminal justice system which spanned decades. Over two years the commission received 157 public submissions, more than 150 000 documents, issued 433 notices to produce and had more than 200 formal requests for information. There were nearly 100 witnesses, over 129 days of public hearings, and this work culminated in an extensive report with 111 recommendations at the end of last year.

It was a welcome gift when I took over the portfolio to be handed a very heavy, substantial amount of summer reading in relation to this important work—not to make light of the issues that it raised. As I said, these are very troubling issues that we want to ensure that our system can never be exposed to again. Fifty-four recommendations were directed to the Victorian government, 41 to Victoria Police and the remainder to a range of local legal stakeholders, including DPP, Vic Bar, the Public Interest Monitor, IBAC, the Law Institute of Victoria, the Law Council of Australia, the Legal Service Council and the Victorian Legal Services Board and commissioner. So as you can appreciate, this is a massive report with a lot of recommendations that are going to take some time to deliver, but we are well underway in starting that important work. We have certainly been very clear about our intention to work with all of the implementation agencies to deliver the recommendations, and we moved very quickly to put in place a clear governance structure and an implementation framework to support the implementation of those recommendations, a little bit like we did in family violence, just to make sure that everyone is working at the same pace and committed to the delivery.

This year's budget allocates \$87.92 million to support that critical work. In particular, as Mr O'Brien asked about, there is the establishment of the special investigator—more than \$13 million; \$2 million to support the implementation monitor; \$2.6 million for the flow-on impacts of the commission's work into the justice system; and nearly \$40 million for Victoria Police for them to implement more enhanced governance and operational procedures for the management of human sources, which is the whole reason that the royal commission commenced. And there will be also additional funding for the appeal courts to respond to any of the resulting matters. There are indeed systematic and enduring changes that are required, but the commission's report does provide a really good blueprint for us to be able to deliver that. That is certainly one of my main objectives in relation to the portfolio that I hold, and I am confident that we are on the right track, particularly with some of the important appointments that we have made recently to help us acquit this.

Ms RICHARDS: Thanks, Attorney. Again, further to that, you have just spoken about having the governance structure and implementation framework to support the delivery of the recommendations. Can you please perhaps talk us through any recommendations that have been acquitted?

Ms SYMES: I can. The commission provided indicative time frames for their recommendations, which is certainly something that we have strived to meet, and indeed I am pleased to say that we have. In total

10 recommendations had three-month time frames, and all were acquitted by government, VicPol and Vic Bar within that time frame. Two recommendations directed to government that had a six-month implementation time frame have also been delivered, and this includes the important establishment of the cross-agency implementation task force, which was recommendation 107, and it has met four times. The task force is chaired by Secretary Falkingham, with membership from all agencies with responsibility for implementing recommendations. To support and assist the work of the implementation task force there are four subject matter based cross-agency working groups, and they are bringing together further stakeholders with significant relevant expertise to coordinate and support the implementation. The implementation task force is also underpinned by a principles-based implementation framework that will ensure the process. This was really important. The process is not just a tick a box and acquitting what a recommendation says but is really aimed at delivering an objective cultural change and, importantly, restoring public confidence and faith in our system.

Another critical step has been the appointment of Sir David Carruthers. He is the implementation monitor, and he will oversee and support the implementation of all recommendations. He is a member of the legal community in New Zealand—going to Mr O’Brien’s point about ensuring that we are getting people in that can be beyond reproach in relation to dealing with these matters. He was appointed as a judge of New Zealand’s family court and the youth court in Wellington in 1985 and then a chief district court judge in 2001 and later chair of the New Zealand parole board. He has also had the role of chair of the New Zealand Independent Police Conduct Authority, so a really great range of skills and experiences to deal with the matters that the commission identified, and indeed having the confidence of the agencies that are responsible because he brings that knowledge and familiarity, particularly with police matters. He is obviously in New Zealand, but he has hit the ground running. I have had a couple of meetings with him, and he has certainly met with every relevant agency in relation to his important work. There is legislation that has been introduced into your chamber to support the implementation monitor’s statutory office, and that will provide him with the full powers necessary to do his job.

We have also appointed an independent senior counsel to review and report on 11 human source files that were not provided to the commission by Victoria Police on public interest immunity grounds. That review will provide a further assurance to the Victorian community that any circumstances where a lawyer has been used as a human source have been uncovered. I hope that answers your question. There has been substantial progress, but there is a lot of work to do.

Ms RICHARDS: Thanks, Attorney. Just in the very short amount of time left, I was actually wondering if you could expand a little bit on Mr O’Brien’s question before about the special investigator. How and when will the special investigator start? What will the investigation involve?

Ms SYMES: I was just conferring. We literally appointed him yesterday or the day before, so I am just finalising his executive contract et cetera, but effectively we could say he has started. He knows he has got the job. It was a significant recommendation, so for the benefit of the committee, the special investigator will investigate whether there is sufficient evidence to establish the commission of criminal offences connected with Victoria Police’s use of Ms Gobbo as a human source. The commission also made a recommendation that the special investigator be empowered to investigate whether there is sufficient evidence to establish the commission of misconduct or breach of a discipline under the *Victoria Police Act*, so in effect his role is to continue the work that the commission deliberately did not complete.

Ms RICHARDS: Right. Thank you so much, Attorney.

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

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Attorney and team. Pretty much everything in the budget is dependent on the operation of the emergency powers, and my team has been paying very close attention to these and how they work. One of the things that came out a couple of days ago was new subordinate legislation, and this is exempting certain things from or defining them as not subordinate legislation. There is a whole raft of things, but one of the things in there is it is exempting emergency health directions under the *Public Health and Wellbeing Act*. Now, one of the things that this exemption does is exempts it from producing human rights certificates and scrutiny of acts and regulations. I would like to ask the Attorney is she aware of this and has been consulted on actually how this is operating and its interactions with things like scrutiny of acts and regulations and human rights issues.

Ms SYMES: Thank you, Mr Limbrick, for your question. On the face of it I believe that your questions would be more appropriately directed to the health minister. I am not in a position to go into a lot of detail about the issues that you have raised, but I would just say that your comment around the budget initiatives relying on emergency powers, I hope I did not give you that impression in my presentation. The budget allocation for my portfolio is independent of any emergency powers that the government has relied on to keep the community safe throughout the pandemic.

Mr LIMBRICK: All right. Thank you. So you were not consulted on this? Because there is a consultation certificate that was submitted with this from Minister Pearson that said that it was certifying that all other ministers whose areas of responsibility may be affected by this subordinate legislation have been consulted with, so nothing in this would affect your portfolio if you had not been consulted on it?

Ms SYMES: No.

Mr LIMBRICK: Okay, fine. Another issue that I know we have spoken about before and I have raised in Parliament is the issue of discrimination and the operation of VEOHRC going forward. I have raised this issue with VEOHRC as well, and I know I have raised it with the Attorney in Parliament. VEOHRC have recently come back to me on the issue of masks, and they have confirmed what was being told to me, that large numbers of people are being discriminated against because of mask mandates. In fact they said the commission has received a large number of inquiries from people with lawful exemptions that are being denied services because they are not wearing a mask, such as people with disabilities and those with physical and mental health conditions. Now, this has been a concern for me for some time, that these directions are resulting in human rights issues and enabling, in my mind, discrimination. What are the Attorney-General and VEOHRC doing to actually address this? Because it looks like a really widespread problem. The stories that I am getting are quite horrible, and it appears that the commission itself is getting lots of these stories as well.

Ms SYMES: Yes. Thank you, Mr Limbrick, for your question. Indeed, for the benefit of other committee members, we have had several conversations about these issues in the upper house, and I certainly welcome continued conversation about them. When masks were first required to be worn under public health orders issued in July 2020 VEOHRC issued a statement that the requirement to wear a mask does not violate any of the rights in our human rights charter and our responsibilities et cetera, but they also noted that wearing a face covering is an appropriate step to protect the health of Victorians. Importantly, going to your point, Mr Limbrick, they also noted that there were exceptions in the public health orders allowing certain people not to wear a mask—for example, if they have a medical condition that affects their ability to wear masks or if people are communicating with a person with a hearing impairment.

As you have identified, it is fair to say that the commission has received a large number of inquiries from people with lawful exemptions to the mandatory wearing of face masks who are being denied services because they are not wearing a mask, and this of course can have an impact on people with disabilities and those with physical and mental health conditions. At the outset I would say that the commission can and will investigate any complaint and we at DJCS, particularly off the back of reports from VEOHRC and indeed your own inquiries, Mr Limbrick, are working with DJPR to make sure that businesses understand these exemptions.

There are a lot of complaints going to VEOHRC. I anticipate, or I hope, that the majority of those are genuine complaints, because I really want those genuine complaints to be dealt with, but it is fair to say that they get spikes of complaints particularly responding to, say, different organisations promoting it through social media and the like. So I do have a few concerns that a lot of the complaints are being generated by movements on social media, which has the consequence of potentially drowning out some of those genuine complaints. However, as I have said before, I do urge businesses and indeed the community to be kind, to be tolerant and accepting that people have genuine reasons for not wearing a mask. I know when the pandemic first started people that were wearing masks were kind of looked upon as pariahs and potentially faced adverse comment from members in the community, and it has flipped. I get that people are scared and they are concerned about their health, but that is no excuse to indeed discriminate or treat anybody poorly for a legitimate reason for not wearing a mask.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you, Attorney, but we have a situation where the clear evidence is that the way that the direction works in the minds of the public health team that come up with the direction and the way that it actually works in reality are two very, very different things. Some people have said to me that the

discrimination that is happening may actually be legitimate, may be exempt because they are allowed to discriminate on public health grounds, and that may only be tested in a court. I mean, I am not sure how that would actually work. Are we only going to find this out through someone taking this through to the courts?

Ms SYMES: Look, I think I can just refer to my previous answer. If people are experiencing this issue, if you have a legitimate reason not to wear a mask, I do not want you to feel as though you cannot go out. I want the public, I want businesses, to be welcoming and understanding. So all I can do, Mr Limbrick, is continue to promote that message. VEOHRC will promote that message and indeed respond to complaints as they arise, and we will continue as a government to promote those positive messages through our businesses and those people that provide services to people that will be entering their premises where required to wear a mask but that will be entering without a mask due to an exemption.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you. And just lastly, one of the items mentioned in your presentation, the change or suppression conversion practices scheme—that \$2.8 million that is allocated to that—when will that actually be up and running and start taking reports?

Ms SYMES: I believe my friend Mr Porter down the end has got specific dates. I might just ask him to respond to your question, Mr Limbrick.

Mr PORTER: Mr Limbrick, I believe it is 16 February 2022.

Mr LIMBRICK: Okay. Thank you, and I believe I am out of time. Thanks.

Ms SYMES: Thank you.

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

Ms TAYLOR: Attorney, department officials, if I can refer you to budget paper 3, page 89, which outlines the government's \$93 million investment in supporting Victoria's forensic capability. Noting that this funding is going towards the Victorian Institute of Forensic Medicine, could you please explain how this investment will support the institute to perform its important role in our justice system?

Ms SYMES: Thank you, Ms Taylor. It is an apt question from somebody that I know has a really strong interest in science as well. This is a really exciting part of my portfolio. VIFM play a crucial role in the justice system, delivering scientific and medical services that are critical to holding offenders to account, supporting the justice system and investigations for police, for example, but also giving families of deceased persons answers about death.

VIFM provide forensic pathology and scientific services to the State Coroner and the justice system, and I guess to give a bit of a flavour about some of the things they do, they run the state mortuary and are responsible for medico-legal investigations of all deaths reported to the coroner. Their findings are used to support homicide detectives to identify and convict perpetrators and also help coroners determine causes of death. VIFM deliver clinical forensic medicine services. This work involves medical specialists collecting evidence of injuries from victims of sexual and violent assaults and preparing reports which are later used in prosecuting offenders, and they carry out toxicology services, analysing roadside drug tests, for example, as well as samples from deceased people involved in road accidents, which indeed go to helping to reduce the road toll.

It is pretty awesome when you go down there. It is full of scientists and doctors, and yes, it is like CSI; they are all in their white coats. They are world renowned. Our forensic medical researchers are among some of the finest in our country, so supporting them through this budget is something I have been particularly proud of, because they are certainly deserving. Over recent years population growth has seen the demand for VIFM grow. For example, the number of death investigations has grown 40 per cent in the last seven years to more than 7000 in 2019–20, and demand for clinical forensic medicine has also increased.

The \$93 million investment in the budget that you alluded to provides important support to make sure VIFM can continue to deliver this high-quality service in a speedy and, importantly, a respectful way. Properly resourced death investigations are important to families who have unexpectedly lost a loved one. It means that they can get answers about what happened more quickly and receive the remains as soon as possible, allowing them to hold a funeral service. Particularly for certain cultures, beliefs and customs it is really important that

this can be done as quickly as possible. It also means that we have got specifically trained people that can deal with families and indeed those important scientific issues. Appropriately funding VIFM will support high-quality medicolegal investigations, which means homicide cases can be more quickly investigated and evidence generated to support arrests and convictions. The supply of high-quality evidence from pathologists in court also means that victims get justice as efficiently as possible and that the community can have that confidence that those convictions are reliable because the evidence sourced is indeed of a high quality.

Our investment in VIFM's toxicology services will enable it to continue to, as I mentioned, reduce the state road toll and draw attention to the dangers of illicit drugs, particularly new substances that have come in. They do work in identifying the worst drugs in relation to the impact on the community's health. They have been able, for example, to identify novel psychoactive substances being sold in clubs and on the street which have led to overdoses, so it enables public warnings to inform people about some of these substances and to steer clear. Their work on clinical forensic medicine has also enabled better public understanding of the harms of sexual assault, and in addition to their work substantiating and documenting the injuries sustained by victims for use in court they have been doing research which helps to shine a light on emerging trends, such as sexual assault that is facilitated by dating apps. So they do more than I thought they did. They are certainly a committed bunch down there, and it is great that we have been able to support them through a significant investment in this year's budget.

Ms TAYLOR: Thank you. If I can just explore a bit more on that issue of medicolegal death investigations, noting budget paper 3, page 94, and that the government's investment will allow VIFM to add magnetic resonance imaging to its facility, how will this technology enable the VIFM to better serve the Victorian community?

Ms SYMES: Thank you for your question, and I guess for the benefit of the committee magnetic resonance imaging is MRI, which I think is probably a bit more familiar language to people. But as I did go through in my previous answer, the main purpose of forensic pathology work is investigating the cause and circumstances of an individual's death, and it includes working out if the death is suspicious under the guidance of coroners and police. MRI is certainly transforming the practices of forensic pathology and clinical forensic medicine. An MRI is a medical imaging machine commonly used on living patients. You would be familiar with them being in most of our hospitals. It uses magnetic fields and radio waves to capture internal images of the body. When used post mortem it can uncover more about what has happened to a person so that it can inform the determination of causes of death and, importantly, it can actually prevent the need for an autopsy.

The MRI machine has been funded in this year's budget, so it will dramatically enhance outcomes of death investigations, reduce time and certainly meet the family's expectations. It was the big ask when I went for the visit, pre visit. They explained that the MRI scan can be used to detect otherwise unidentifiable injuries and pathologies, such as soft tissue damage or injury. One of the good examples they gave me is strangulation, which is not always necessarily obvious to the physical eye. So in terms of that, the machine can definitely help to identify that, but it can also look at the brain, heart and other soft tissue issues that CT scanners and even autopsies sometimes fail to pick up. As I mentioned, the MRI will in certain cases avoid the need for an autopsy entirely because it does not need that invasive physical examination.

Importantly, another great benefit of the work that VIFM do is that significant pathology on the deceased is often life saving for other family members, so they might identify the cause of death, which happens to be, say, a genetic health issue where indeed the information passed on to other relatives might save their lives. So all of this equipment and investment has numerous benefits, and they were pretty happy about it.

Ms TAYLOR: Yes, wow. It is interesting, true to what you said. I am like, 'Wow'.

Ms SYMES: It is great. I could stay there all day. They do pretty amazing work down there.

Ms TAYLOR: Yes. Fantastic. I think it would be useful for the committee to understand VIFM's place within the wider justice system. How will the government's investment in VIFM support courts and the justice system, particularly on a topic that has been discussed quite a lot today—that is, to drive down backlogs?

Ms SYMES: Yes, well, the whole system works in reliance on one another, so as I have sort of explained, VIFM are responsible for gathering a lot of forensic evidence that would be used in criminal trials. So without, say, the speed of an MRI machine or the like it can add to the length of trials—if they are waiting on more

evidence to be gathered. So the more investment you have, again, that just makes the whole system more efficient.

Ms TAYLOR: Great. Thanks.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mr Newbury.

Mr NEWBURY: Thank you. Attorney, can I just quickly ask you a question in relation to your slide pack earlier? On slide 2 you were speaking about the family violence courts, and on page 286 of budget paper 3 there is a reference to family violence being higher than target 'due to people being contained in the home', and I am reading, 'under the Chief Health Officer's directions'. Do you have a view on the higher target and that acknowledgement in the budget that that rate is higher because of the chief health officer's directions?

Ms SYMES: Look, Mr Newbury, unfortunately family violence is prevalent in our community, and that is why as a government we have taken a whole-of-government approach to tackling this head on. I was working in the opposition rooms when the then opposition announced a royal commission into family violence, which obviously commenced when Labor won the election in 2014. We are also the first jurisdiction to implement a dedicated family violence minister, Minister Williams. We know we need a continued effort to respond to family violence matters, and I have been made aware of the reports that you have indicated as well of increasing numbers. I would say that family violence numbers—

Mr NEWBURY: Would you accept that budget reference, that the chief health officer's directions are a cause?

Ms SYMES: Which budget reference was that?

Mr NEWBURY: Page 286 of budget paper 3, family violence related crime is higher 'due to people being contained in the home under the Chief Health Officer's directions'.

Ms SYMES: Yes, Mr Newbury. The chief commissioner is on the record and indeed creating a new operation to respond specifically to these issues. We know that restrictions meant that more people were confined to their homes which meant more victims were spending more time with potential perpetrators, and as I said, that is why—and a good reason—this government takes this issue very seriously. We have multiple ministers with responsibilities in this space, including Minister Williams, Minister Hutchins and indeed my responsibility of supporting the courts to deal with family violence matters. Indeed this budget has funding for specialist family violence courts, which are a division in the Magistrates Court, to provide specially trained Magistrates Court staff and family violence practitioners; the power to mandate participation by perpetrators in men's behaviour change programs; an important component emphasis on integrated service delivery and a therapeutic operating model; as well as important safe and secure facilities for victim-survivors and their families, including remote witness facilities, waiting rooms and separate entries. I am sure many in this committee have visited their courts, for example, and some of the old buildings are not particularly conducive to a safe environment for victims to attend court because they can come face to face with their perpetrator and that can be obviously quite intimidating and traumatic. So that is why we have provided a lot of investment following on from the findings of the royal commission to make the process more welcoming.

As you have identified, the stats are going up. They have been tracking up for some time, and the positives of that are that more women in particular are feeling more confident about coming forward and reporting those incidents and getting the help that they need.

Mr NEWBURY: Thank you. Are you aware of a cabinet minister being named as an associated party in relation to a police complaint on a family violence matter?

Ms RICHARDS: On a point of order. On a point of order, Chair.

The CHAIR: Ms Richards.

Ms RICHARDS: This is way outside the scope of this inquiry and potentially—

Mr NEWBURY: How is it? This is ridiculous.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury.

Mr NEWBURY: Has a cabinet minister been named? I mean, the department may have provided advice.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury!

Ms RICHARDS: It is potentially a matter that is a new low, and I ask that the member comes back to the inquiry that we have before us.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, I have heard enough on the point of order. I uphold the point of order. Your question is out of order, and I ask that—

Mr NEWBURY: I have not even finished my question, so I am not sure how a Labor chair can rule on the question. I mean, seriously!

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, I ask that you ask a question in relation to the estimates.

Mr NEWBURY: Well, thank you very much. You have absolutely shown that you are sitting there as a Labor MP. Secretary, has the department sought advice in relation to a cabinet minister being named in a family violence-related matter?

The CHAIR: Secretary, you need not answer that. The question is out of order.

Mr NEWBURY: That is completely within the scope.

Ms TAYLOR: On a point of order—

Mr NEWBURY: That is completely within scope.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury! Ms Taylor.

Ms TAYLOR: I think we should be extremely careful in these proceedings that we do not potentially produce the outcome of legal proceedings which may be on foot, bearing in mind there may be—

Mr NEWBURY: Are there legal proceedings? Is that what you are saying?

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, I am not hearing you at the moment. I am hearing Ms Taylor on the point of order.

Mr NEWBURY: No, no. What you are doing is you are using your role as a Labor protection racket. That is what you are doing.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, you do not have the call. Mr Newbury, could you please stop speaking over the top of me—

Mr NEWBURY: There is an allegation that a cabinet minister has been named in a family violence complaint.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, could you please stop talking over the top of me. Ms Taylor had the call.

Ms TAYLOR: I am also concerned that we should stay within the ambit of the budget estimates committee.

Mr NEWBURY: Well, I think you just confirmed there was a police complaint, Member.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury. Ms Richards, did you have a—

Mr NEWBURY: The Attorney should be given the opportunity—

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury!

Ms RICHARDS: These are matters of—

Mr NEWBURY: Look, if you are going to be using this as a Labor protection racket, there should not be any ruse about what it is about. This is a protection racket. The Attorney should be given an opportunity—

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury! Could you—

Ms RICHARDS: The idea that the Member for Brighton—

Mr NEWBURY: We have got a member down here who said there is a police investigation underway. I was not aware of that.

Ms Richards interjected.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, I am attempting to hear Ms Richards on the—

Mr NEWBURY: No, what you are doing is you are using your role to cover up.

The CHAIR: Sorry, Ms Richards—just a moment while Mr Newbury gets himself under control.

Mr NEWBURY: I am completely within control. I think a cabinet minister being named in a police complaint is completely in order.

The CHAIR: No, Mr Newbury, speaking over the top of the Chair consistently is out of control. You need to mind yourself. You are beyond—

Mr NEWBURY: You are using your role and using poisonous words to try and illustrate a political point. That is—

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, you are out of order.

Mr NEWBURY: You can use poisonous words all you want, but that does not make them so.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, could you please control yourself. Mr Newbury—

Mr NEWBURY: The Attorney should be given an opportunity on the record to talk about the matter.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, could you please control yourself. Stop speaking over the top of me—

Mr NEWBURY: I am completely in control.

The CHAIR: No, Mr Newbury, you are out of control—

Mr NEWBURY: I am completely in control. You are using your role as a Labor debater, and that is fine, but get back—

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury—

Mr NEWBURY: We can all see what is happening.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, I am attempting to chair this meeting. When someone makes a point of order, they are entitled to be heard on it.

Mr NEWBURY: Chair, can I speak?

The CHAIR: No, Mr Newbury.

Mr NEWBURY: I can make a point of order. I can proceed.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, I am not making a point of order. I am attempting to hear those that wish to contribute on the point of order.

Mr NEWBURY: I wish to contribute on the point of order.

The CHAIR: Well, you can wait your turn then, thank you. At the moment I am attempting to hear Ms Richards, and I cannot because you are consistently interrupting her. So if I could hear Ms Richards, you may then well have a turn. Ms Richards.

Ms RICHARDS: I absolutely implore this committee to come back to the terms of reference that we are exploring today and ask for some sort of coherence and some sort of respect for the processes from the Member for Brighton.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

Mr NEWBURY: I wish to—

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, I have you on the speaking—

Mr NEWBURY: I wish to use a point.

The CHAIR: Yes. And, Mr Newbury, I have you on the speaking list if you will wait for your call.

Mr NEWBURY: I put my hand up next. I am entitled to return.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, you are, and I was going to give you that opportunity once I had turned my head to you, but you have an inability to wait your turn. It is now your turn.

Mr NEWBURY: Thank you. There are allegations that a victim who was offered a job in the Labor government has brought a complaint—

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, on the point of order. Mr Newbury, you are out of order.

Mr NEWBURY: a domestic violence complaint.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, you are out of order. That is not on the point of order. Mr Newbury!

Mr NEWBURY: There is an allegation that a job was offered. There is an allegation that a cabinet minister was named.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, you are out of order, and I will not have this forum used for this type of behaviour.

Mr NEWBURY: The Attorney is entitled to respond to those issues.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, I have heard enough from you. You are not speaking on the point of order. Mr Richardson.

Mr NEWBURY: Are you saying that Labor is using—I move:

That the Attorney be offered an opportunity to respond for 3 minutes.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury!

Mr NEWBURY: Chair, I have moved the motion. I am seeking a seconder. Is there a seconder? I have a seconder. Chair—

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, I can put your motion when I have finished hearing on the point of order.

Mr NEWBURY: Fine.

The CHAIR: At the moment you are out of order. Mr Richardson.

Mr RICHARDSON: On a point of order, Chair. I do not think it is a practice of any committee, let alone any member of Parliament, to try to go into what could be speculation, media reports, allegations—

Mr NEWBURY: Your colleague just said there is a police investigation.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, you have had your turn.

Mr RICHARDSON: I know that there have been elements of fishing in the past from members of Parliament, putting things forward, like with the Treasurer, when restrictions had not been eased, and that was put forward as if it was fact.

Mr RIORDAN: Well, it was fact.

Mr NEWBURY: It was fact!

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury and Mr Riordan, you have both had an opportunity.

Mr RICHARDSON: The practice of just screaming needlessly over you, Chair, is deplorable. It has been persistent, and it reflects very poorly yelling over the top of a female chair consistently.

Mr NEWBURY: Oh, do not use that card.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury!

Mr NEWBURY: If you are concerned—

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, you are doing it again.

Mr NEWBURY: about your confidence in the Chair—

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury!

Mr NEWBURY: then you need to speak to your boss.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, you are yelling over the Chair again, and I ask you to desist.

Mr NEWBURY: If you are concerned about your confidence in the Chair, then speak to your boss.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury!

Mr RICHARDSON: It is loud and it is aggressive, and it is not what Mr Dalidakis—

Mr NEWBURY: No, wrong. Wrong. Do not use your role as a Labor MP—

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury! Sorry, Mr Richardson, I cannot hear you because Mr Newbury continues to yell over the top of you and over the top of me as Chair.

Mr NEWBURY: If you use poisonous words, that does not make it so.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, you are proving the point.

Mr RICHARDSON: Mr Dalidakis did not experience this kind of bullying, and neither did Mr Pearson.

Mr NEWBURY: Well, he did from his own boss. That is why he left Parliament. What are you talking about?

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, you are out of order.

Mr RICHARDSON: I would ask you to bring Mr Newbury back into line. This is not a practice of demonising people who might be out there making complaints on a range of issues. Any certain person, regardless—

Mr Newbury interjected.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, I am trying to hear Mr Richardson.

Mr Newbury interjected.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, I am trying to hear Mr Richardson, and you are out of order.

Mr RICHARDSON: This is a budget hearing, and—

Mr NEWBURY: No, this is a probity hearing—

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, I am attempting to hear Mr Richardson, and you are out of order.

Mr RICHARDSON: It is just phantom media speculation. We are here to do the budget, and that is what we should be doing. Once again though, character assassinations by the coalition but particularly by the Liberals during these hearings—

Mr NEWBURY: Are you saying it is untrue?

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury! Mr Newbury, you have had an opportunity. Sorry, Mr Richardson. Mr Newbury, you have had an opportunity to speak on the point of order.

Mr RICHARDSON: This may be the way you conduct yourselves in the Liberal Party room. This is PAEC, the pre-eminent committee—

Mr NEWBURY: Of oversight.

Mr RICHARDSON: of the Victorian Parliament.

Mr NEWBURY: Of oversight and probity, Mr Richardson.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury! Mr Newbury, I cannot hear Mr Richardson on the point of order when you continue to yell over the top of him and over the top of me.

Mr NEWBURY: I am not yelling.

The CHAIR: You are yelling.

Mr RICHARDSON: Now, Mr Newbury, I have got some questions about specialist family violence courts that I would like to ask, so if we could get on with it—

Mr NEWBURY: I did too.

The CHAIR: Well, Mr Newbury, your questions were out of order. I accept Ms Richards's point of order, and I now pass the call to Mr Richardson.

Mr D O'BRIEN: On a point of order, Chair, with respect to process—

Mr Newbury interjected.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, now I am attempting to hear Mr O'Brien, and I cannot because you are laughing at him.

Mr NEWBURY: No, I am not laughing at him, I am laughing at the idea that there is process from a Labor MP. This is a joke.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, now you are interrupting Mr O'Brien.

Mr D O'BRIEN: The standard forms of the house are that people are entitled to ask a question. As I heard what happened just then, Ms Richards took a point of order before the question was even out, before Mr Newbury—I did not even know where he was going with it. Now, I do not know whether the government was expecting something and knows something that they are very nervous about, but the speed at which that point of order was taken was extraordinary, and then it was ruled out before a question had even been asked.

And on the point of order that was raised and on your ruling, Chair, and on Mr Richardson's comments, can I remind this committee the number one, the first, objective of our committee on our website for this inquiry is promoting the accountability, transparency and integrity of the executive and the public sector. It does not say it

must be about the budget, notwithstanding that the question quite well could have budgetary implications. I just remind the committee of that.

There seems to be a very, very quick response to something that government members were concerned about, and it is incumbent on you, Chair, and on members of the committee to at least allow members of the committee to ask a question, particularly when it was new information being introduced. If it was something that previously the Chair had ruled on, fair enough. But we did not even know what the question was and you were ruling it out.

Mr RICHARDSON: Unfounded media reports are where we want to go—

Mr NEWBURY: So are you going to stop him from interjecting—

The CHAIR: Yes, I am going to—

Mr NEWBURY: or is it just Liberals?

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, if I had an opportunity to ask Mr Richardson—

Mr NEWBURY: Look how quickly you are on me.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, I was about to ask Mr Richardson—

Mr NEWBURY: Tim gets his own little 10 minutes in.

Mr MAAS: Lower your voice.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, I was about to ask Mr Richardson—

Mr NEWBURY: I have a strong voice.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, a strong voice is no excuse for yelling.

Mr NEWBURY: I am not. I just have a strong voice. I cannot help it.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, I was about to ask Mr Richardson not to interrupt, and you interrupted before I—

Mr Newbury interjected.

The CHAIR: No, I do not need your assistance, Mr Newbury, and I do not appreciate the constant interruptions. There is no further point of order, and I would—

Mr NEWBURY: I would like to add to the point of order.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, I have heard enough contributions on the point of order, and I am ready to rule on it.

Mr NEWBURY: No, no—Chair, you are not entitled to do that.

The CHAIR: I am. Mr Newbury, I have heard the contributions—

Mr NEWBURY: What about taxpayer-funded staff? If the job has been offered to someone to withdraw a complaint—

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, you are out of order.

Mr NEWBURY: I mean, that is serious.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury!

Ms SYMES: Chair, if I may assist the committee. Mr Newbury, on the questions that you have raised, I agree with the Labor members' points of order—they are not in order for this committee. I know that the lower

house does not pay a lot of attention to what is happening in the upper house, but I can assure you that your questions have been put to me and responded to appropriately.

Mr NEWBURY: I have read your responses, and that is not true.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury! Thank you, Minister. Thank you, Mr Newbury.

Mr NEWBURY: That is not true.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury!

Mr Newbury interjected.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, you are out of order.

Ms SYMES: I am not aware of that.

Mr NEWBURY: You are not aware of that?

Ms SYMES: No.

The CHAIR: Minister, I ask that you do not respond to Mr Newbury, who is interjecting. Mr Newbury has had his opportunity. Mr Richardson.

Mr RICHARDSON: Thanks, Chair. Thank you, Minister and department representatives, for joining us. Attorney-General, I am going to take you to the topic of births, deaths and marriages, and I want to refer you to budget paper 3, page 305, which outlines several performance measures relating to births, deaths and marriages registration transactions, including funding to protect personal identity through registration of life events. Births, deaths and marriages are involved in some of the most important life events for Victorians. I can vouch for that, with little Orla arriving four months ago. I was wondering if you could please outline for the committee's benefit how these performance measures are tracking.

Ms SYMES: Of course. Thank you, Mr Richardson. Indeed congratulations again on the arrival of beautiful Orla. I have been following you on social media, and she is gorgeous.

Of course BDM has recorded some of Victorians' most significant life moments—registering the birth of a child, the passing of a loved one or a marriage. BDM plays a crucial role in that it helps provide a centralised database for government and service providers and it helps for people to be able to establish their identities for specific purposes. It also provides an amazing database to help track a person's family history in Victoria. As you are likely aware, last year BDM had to close its customer service centre and call centre.

Mr NEWBURY: It is still closed. That was a year ago.

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

Ms SYMES: That was in March 2020—

Mr NEWBURY: It is still closed. Right now, it is closed. If you want to go on the website—

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury! Sorry, Minister.

Mr NEWBURY: So political interjections can only go one way?

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, please control yourself.

Mr NEWBURY: Look at the website—it is closed.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, control yourself.

Mr NEWBURY: Look at that big red tick—closed.

Mr NEWBURY: Mr Newbury, I ask that you control yourself.

Mr NEWBURY: I am completely in control. I am allowed to make a political point.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, you have had more than your turn. It is Mr Richardson's call.

Mr RICHARDSON: You even get help answering questions today.

Ms SYMES: No. They are important matters, and I acknowledge Mr Newbury's interjection. I know that electorate officers have been helping constituents deal with BDM matters, and these are matters that we are responding to. As your question identified, in relation to how we are tracking I am pleased to say that services are recommencing. We have got a dedicated phone message service and a priority email address for urgent applications to support the community. Throughout the pandemic there were opportunities for BDM to maintain its mandated certificate turnaround times and to communicate with stakeholders and customers via email and outbound calls.

In terms of responding to some of the challenges as result of closing the centre, the BDM also introduced trackable mail for all legal certificates and Express Post for faster delivery. This improved certificate delivery time frames, and indeed importantly that flows onto better customer experience. I would like to acknowledge that as restrictions were lifted some Victorians had trouble in accessing call-back services or emails to their inquiries. I recognise that the remote functioning caused longer wait times for our customers, and I am certainly on the record in apologising for that inconvenience. Often accessing services online does not always provide everyone with a straightforward answer and calling someone with expertise can be a much easier approach, especially for those that may not have access to up-to-date technology or be familiar with government processes such as BDM.

I would certainly like to use the opportunity, Mr Richardson, to thank the hardworking staff at BDM, including many newly recruited members, who in response to high levels of demand have worked tirelessly, including on weekends, to deal with the issues and the backlog. They are now ensuring that all inquiries are responded to within 48 hours. The justice service centres around Victoria are also taking appointments and offering support for BDM-related queries through a priority phone line, and BDM have made a range of changes to their website to improve customer experience and to make it easier, based on customer feedback, to locate relevant sections. As a result, BDM is on track to meet most of its key performance measures this year. As I have identified and as Mr Newbury pointed out, there have been challenges, and I have no doubt that we will experience a dip in the satisfaction with BDM services. But I am confident that with the support of the department and, as I said, new recruits and new practices responding to customer feedback, we will be on track to ensuring that we deliver a service that Victorians deserve.

Mr RICHARDSON: Noting we have obviously been through unprecedented challenges over the last 18 months with the coronavirus pandemic, and noting that you have flagged that members of the public were impacted by the closure of the call centre, when will the call centre reopen?

Ms SYMES: I am pleased to say that the registry has been actively recruiting new staff. Twenty-four new staff have been recently hired to enable the call centre to be fully operational. The call centre is now open, and it is processing hundreds of calls per day. Reopening the call centre was certainly my highest priority, because it did reflect the feedback that I was getting both as Attorney and through my electorate office, and I know other members were receiving calls as well. It was important for me to prioritise the call centre because obviously it is easier for people to access a phone, particularly if they are in regional Victoria, rather than a shopfront, for example. Although services are available online as well, the supplemented assistance from the call centre does provide a great service for people that need that additional support.

It is imperative that call centre operators are trained, which has led to some of the delays. The COVID pandemic meant that government priorities shifted to, say, contact tracing, for example, and we had staff that were shifted into health roles. A lot of those staff did not come back to the call centre, so we were experiencing a shortage of staff. You cannot just put someone on a phone line without having adequate training, so it has taken some time to rebuild the capacity of the call centre. As I said, it has opened now and is hopefully providing a better service than what it had been in the preceding months.

Mr RICHARDSON: Following the lifting of restrictions, was there an increase in demand during that time, Minister?

Ms SYMES: There was a massive increase in demand for BDM. I guess it is unsurprising, the surge in incoming applications. Applications increased by over 2000 per week compared to the end of 2020, and the number of incoming emails also doubled. For example, in December 2020 BDM received around 5000 applications each week, and this has increased to, on average, around 8000 applications each week. This has included a range of requests; for example, requesting a birth certificate to access a loan or enrol in education or indeed access a new job. Unsurprisingly the number of weddings in 2021 surged, and indeed lots more babies are being born as well. These are major life events when the public need to interact with the registry, and it certainly, as I have indicated, demonstrated an uptick in demand for a variety of reasons, predominately caused by COVID. But it is a promising sign that we are hoping to return to normal and people are hoping to engage in those special life events that require interaction with BDM. As I said, more staff are being recruited to deal with this increased demand, but again I do acknowledge that there have been some delays. Our times are tracking much better now, and I am seeking to have further improvements as the weeks and months progress.

Mr RICHARDSON: I might leave it there, Chair. I do not think I will get another one out.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Richardson. That concludes the time we have set aside with you, Minister, for consideration of the estimates as they relate to the portfolio of Attorney-General. Any questions which were taken on notice in writing will be followed up, and responses will be required within 10 working days of the committee's request. The committee will now take a short break before resuming consideration with you of your resources portfolio. I declare this hearing adjourned.

Witnesses withdrew.