

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2021–22 and 2022–23 Financial and Performance Outcomes

Melbourne – Monday 20 November 2023

MEMBERS

Sarah Connolly – Chair

Nicholas McGowan – Deputy Chair

Michael Galea

Mathew Hilakari

Lauren Kathage

Bev McArthur

Danny O’Brien

Ellen Sandell

Meng Heang Tak

WITNESSES

Trish Burrows, Secretary, Department of Parliamentary Services,

Bridget Noonan, Clerk, Legislative Assembly,

Robert McDonald, Clerk, Legislative Council, and

Anne Sargent, Deputy Clerk, Legislative Council.

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

On behalf of the Parliament, the committee is conducting this Inquiry into the 2021–22 and 2022–23 Financial and Performance Outcomes. Its aim is to gauge what the government achieved in both financial years compared to what the government planned to achieve.

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

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

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

I welcome the Secretary of the Department of Parliamentary Services, Trish Burrows. Welcome. I am going to invite you to make an opening statement or presentation of no more than 10 minutes. This will be followed by questions from the committee. Your 10 minutes starts now.

Visual presentation.

Robert McDONALD: Thank you, Chair. I am kicking things off. Firstly, we have got a bit of a presentation just to show you the breakdown of the different parliamentary departments' budgets for 2021–22 and 2022–23, the period that you are looking into. As you will see, it is divided up between the three parliamentary departments, but there is also a large proportion that is members' administered budgets, which is something that DPS administers on behalf of members and is not actually money that the departments themselves spend in their delivery of services.

Covering off on a couple of our priority initiatives over that period, the first thing particularly for 2021 was responding to COVID-19. That was a significant challenge that the Parliament faced because we did continue to operate the Parliament and parliamentary committees during COVID and the lockdown period. But it did lead to a number of improvements to parliamentary procedure and also some changes to practice. Remote participation is something that we are now able to offer more broadly and online committee hearings as well, and there were some changes to division procedures in both houses to accommodate that. Throughout that period we also updated and regularly monitored our COVID-safe plan and did a range of activities to ensure that the Parliament could continue to operate. Finally, there was the establishment of the Pandemic Declaration Accountability and Oversight Committee, so a new joint investigatory committee operated for that period. That was administered via the Department of Legislative Assembly but was something that again we as the parliamentary departments had to support.

In terms of my own department, I suppose the one thing that I want to highlight was Council committee activity. That continues to be a large part of the department's work. During the 59th Parliament the three council standing committees, as it shows there, undertook 24 inquiries delivering 26 reports, with a number of hearings and submissions as part of that. In the 60th Parliament up to the date that is the end of the reporting period that the committee is looking at, eight inquiries had already been referred to standing committees for this Parliament. A new Select Committee on Victoria's Recreational Native Bird Hunting Arrangements had been established, and I suppose that one of the ongoing challenges for the department is to resource that level of activity. We are obviously resourced to support the three standing committees as much as we can, but when

select committees are added and multiple inquiries it becomes challenging. So we have been working with government to put in some budget submissions to provide funding for those activities. I will now hand over to Bridget.

Visual presentation.

Bridget NOONAN: Thanks, Robert. And thanks, committee. I wanted to highlight for the committee some of the work that went into transitioning to the 60th Parliament, because there is a considerable amount of planning and delivery in support of that transition. We had relatively high turnover in both houses, particularly when you think about the Legislative Council – that is half of the membership that is turned over. Particularly for Trish and her team there is a lot of work in electorate office audits, handbacks and handovers, and of course members of the committee have all experienced that as an incoming member. It can be a more stressful proposition for an outgoing member, that audit and handover process. All three departments have spent a lot of time and energy on inducting new members, electorate officers and parliamentary advisers, and that is always a work in progress. There is always more work to do, but we hope that that has been useful for members and staff.

It was interesting preparing for this presentation and reflecting on what we have done over the last two years, and those of you who were members in the last Parliament will recall the demise-of-the-Crown arrangements when of course Her Majesty died. Section 23(2) of the Constitution requires all of our members to be re-sworn when the Parliament is advised of the demise of the Crown, so that all that had to come together very, very quickly. When you consider that we have not had that experience for 70 years, that is ever so slightly beyond the corporate memory of the staff that we have. So comprehensive file notes were taken about how that happened, and we will know for next time. That was all pulled together very, very quickly. It did mean that the last sitting week for both houses was rescheduled until the week after what was due to be the last sitting week for that Parliament, so there was a lot of activity. But the commissioners came and re-swore all of our existing members, and it felt like we were doing it all again in a slightly different context later that year when there was the opening of the 60th Parliament, which was only, I think, a neat four weeks or not quite four weeks after the election itself. The Parliament opened just before Christmas, which was a huge logistical operation, particularly for my colleagues in the Legislative Council and the usher's office, who pull a lot of that together with the visitors and guests. But our members were all sworn in, Presiding Officers were elected and the Parliament got underway.

I want to touch on some of the work that the tours team do in engaging with schools. You can see the numbers there. There is fairly obviously an increase in in-person activities as we moved out of the more acute pandemic times. I am sure I do not need to persuade the public accounts committee of the value of civics education, and we try a range of activities to ensure that Victorians are really well informed about how their Parliament works and their place in it. The last slide really focuses on work that we do directly with students. There is also a program aimed at tertiary students and at supporting teachers, particularly giving them the confidence and information they need to deliver civics education in schools and in tertiary settings, and we are happy to support that. I might hand over now to Trish.

Visual presentation.

Trish BURROWS: Thanks, Bridget. I have got a few slides here that primarily focus on electorate offices and electorate officers. That has been a core focus for DPS, particularly over the last 12 to 18 months. Giving you an idea about the volume of work that comes in – this has a particular focus on the election year – the graph up on the right-hand side, albeit very small, endeavours to show the number of electorate officers that were on-boarding and off-boarding each year. Even though in the annual report you will see that our headcount at 30 June was around 500 electorate officers, over any one year we will be on- and off-boarding another thousand on top of that. That is quite a high number of staff to bring on, induct and off-board.

We had a focus particularly over these last 12 months on learning and development and support for electorate officers. This slide provides some information about new mandatory training that went into play for electorate officers during their probationary period – lots of e-learnings that were developed specifically in house that fit the environment an electorate officer works in, being a little bit unusual employment arrangements. But this effort will continue throughout, and we are seeking active feedback from electorate officers and members to make sure that it is fit for purpose.

On to the infrastructure itself now – the electorate offices. We have 128 members and not quite 128 electorate offices; there are two members who share an office, so there are 127. We of course work hard to try and place members in their electorate in a place that is suitable to them. A lot of our leases are long-term leases. We try to make sure that we get great value for money. So when we are doing a fit-out, we like to get a lease that might be a four plus four plus four, and we are keeping that electorate office for a long time. I knew I would forget to look it up, but I think the longest electorate office is out in Gippsland somewhere, which we have had for several decades. We do try to look for places that are always going to suit members as they come in.

Also, down the bottom there, we have had a bit of a change to our service delivery model. Each electorate office has a designated property partner, a designated security adviser and a designated HR BP. And down the bottom there, it is just the number of visits over 12 months, except for people and capability, which is just a six-month period. So I am sure members of the committee would have seen different staff members from DPS out in your office, working with your electorate officers, making sure that the space is something that is suitable for you to conduct your business from.

Security is always a high priority for us. This graph shows you the movement of incidents both here in Parliament and on the steps particularly and also reports of incidents in electorate offices. We have done a lot of work with electorate officers trying to support them to put in advice to us when there is an incident in the electorate office. Even very minor small things that perhaps they would not think to report really help the intelligence and knowledge of our security team so that they can provide support and be prepared should there be a major incident. As you can see, it ebbs and flows. 2021–22 was a particularly active period at EOs and then leading into the election is right in the middle of the last two numbers there.

Cybersecurity is the other area of security we have paid a lot of attention to. This slide just gives you a bit of an indication about the work that goes into ensuring that we keep your data safe.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Ms Burrows. The first line of questioning is going to go to the Deputy Chair.

Nick McGOWAN: Thank you. Thank you for your report, Secretary. Secretary, I refer you to page 24 of the Department of Parliamentary Services annual report 2022–23 and figure 1, the DPS's response to the joint IBAC and Victorian Ombudsman report into the misuse of public funds by members of the Labor Party. That is Operation Watts. Secretary, what is the status of DPS's response to the four recommendations that relate to DPS activities – recommendations 11, 12, 13 and 14?

Trish BURROWS: I just missed the start of it. You wanted to know what we have done?

Nick McGOWAN: That is okay. What is the status of DPS's response to those four recommendations?

Trish BURROWS: Sure. Yes. So we are well progressed on those recommendations. We have provided two progress reports to the IBAC Commissioner and the Victorian Ombudsman that are published as well. Primarily, our part of that was to do with electorate officers and improving the recruitment of electorate officers, the training of electorate officers, the understanding of the role of electorate officer as well. So those couple of slides I had previously were really a focus on that. We have used some of the resourcing that we were able to obtain to really support and grow that people and capability team, so most of that has gone into employing staff both as HR advisers and in learning and development. That has been the primary work on that. Another recommendation was to publish the electorate officers code of conduct. That went onto the website straightaway and is available publicly. I think they are pretty much our recommendations that came out of that report.

Nick McGOWAN: What interactions with the government has DPS had in making progress towards the recommendations?

Trish BURROWS: We have regular meetings with our colleagues in DPC to help them understand what work we are doing and also for them to give us some information about how they are progressing with the recommendations that they are accountable for. This really assists us to make sure that we are on the same path. Similarly, the IBAC Acting Commissioner over the time and the representative from Victorian Ombudsman have met with us a couple of times. About the same time they also met with other parties that have got accountabilities in relation to those recommendations. So there is a nice amount of sharing and making sure we

understand what those recommendations were intending to achieve so that the work we are doing is more likely to hit the mark.

Nick McGOWAN: And with DPC, is that Jeremi in particular, or is it a number of people there?

Trish BURROWS: No. It was originally with their deputy secretary and general counsel, but he has since left, so now it is with the deputy secretary responsible for governance.

Nick McGOWAN: What feedback from the government has DPS received about recommendation 11, which calls for the employer of EOs to shift from the Presiding Officers to the Secretary of DPS?

Trish BURROWS: None. I have been asked a question about what the impact would be, how that would work, but that is really practical-type conversations.

Nick McGOWAN: Has that progressed further at this point?

Trish BURROWS: You would have to talk to DPC about that.

Nick McGOWAN: Operation Watts also recommended a review of the DPS audit program. That is recommendation 14. Do you know whether that has occurred?

Trish BURROWS: The three of us sit on the audit and risk committee. The other three members are all independent members. Operation Watts is a standing agenda item. The internal audit program has not got to a point to come back and audit some of the actions, but for example, what would commonly happen is our recruitment process and the rules, if you like, about recruiting electorate officers would be audited sometime in the next maybe two years just to check we are ticking all those boxes off that relate back to Operation Watts. But it is an active agenda item, so every meeting the independent members can ask us questions about that.

Nick McGOWAN: Can you tell us whether there have been any changes made as a result of those reviews or the audit as such?

Trish BURROWS: No, not from the internal audit. They have been a bit like a critical friend, I guess, where we have a discussion and they raise some ideas with us to take away, but the first relevant audit would not be really until a good two years after we have started so you have got great data to go back and look at.

Nick McGOWAN: I refer to the report on the complaint by the Member for Polwarth as published by the Legislative Assembly Privileges Committee. Recommendation 1 at page 7 calls for the review of access policy for electronic data – that is, CCTV footage – for EOs to ensure that the privilege of the house is preserved. Do you know what actions have been taken to implement that?

Trish BURROWS: Yes. Two new policies were approved by the Presiding Officers: one relating to access to CCTV footage and other data on precinct itself; and one in relation to electorate office data, which is primarily, again, CCTV or tap data on cards. The new process that is in place is that – usually the party that wants that data is Victoria Police; other people can, but generally it is Victoria Police – they submit a form to request access to the data. It is reviewed, so they might come in and say, ‘X date, between this time and this time, this is what we’re looking for.’ DPS security will review that and see if they think there is anything relevant on it. The Presiding Officers must sign off on the release of that. Once they have approved it, the member will be advised that there has been an approval and given 36 hours to raise an issue in relation to giving that data to police. If they do not come back in the 36 hours, we release it, but it is on approval by the Presiding Officers. That policy does include some options if there is an absolute emergency situation and the Presiding Officers are not available, but it is a hierarchy, if you like: try as hard as you can to get a Presiding Officer; if you cannot get that, then you move downstream a little bit.

Nick McGOWAN: Is that a written policy? Can we get a copy of that?

Trish BURROWS: Yes. It is on the members intranet. I can send a link.

Nick McGOWAN: What happens if the member is in conflict with the Presiding Officers?

The CHAIR: Apologies, Deputy Chair. We are going to go straight to Mr Hilakari.

Mathew HILAKARI: Thank you so much. Secretary, I am just going to start with your presentation, on page 11, around electorate offices. There are 128 members of Parliament typically elected, and we have got 126, 120, 126. Where are the remaining two to eight offices at any point in time?

Trish BURROWS: Just remind me which slide you are on, apologies.

Mathew HILAKARI: Number 11.

Trish BURROWS: Yes, electorate offices. Officers, offices – it is the bane of my existence.

Mathew HILAKARI: Pardon me. I hope we have got more than 128 electorate officers!

Trish BURROWS: Good point. The 128 are the ones where the member is in the electorate. Of the ones that are currently not in the electorate – 30 June this is, so not current – we have three members who were previous members of the 59th Parliament, but with the boundary changes they were in their old office until we could move them to the other side of the boundary, if you like. The remaining five were ones where we did not have an office for them to go to. Most of them were new electorates, so on the fringes of the city quite a bit, and there were a couple of LC members as well where the fifth office was not available. We try to then work with the member coming in about where they would like to be located. The LC regions being so large, we can have an office available down one end of it, but the member's home is right at the other end of it. So we have to do a bit of rejigging at different points in time. The two that we are expecting still to be left out of their electorate in the next six months are two new vacancies, so two members where the landlord has said, 'We can't extend the lease,' and they have come out of those offices and we are just not confident that we will have them in new premises within six months. But they are not people who were without an office in 2022. They have come on board since.

Mathew HILAKARI: Okay, great. And at the point of the election or just soon thereafter when people were elected – I mean, for me, making sure that I was connected with community and available to community all the time – within reason, not 24 hours a day – was really important to me. I am just wondering how many offices were available for members at that point just after the election as opposed to the 30 June date. Do you have that data at all?

Trish BURROWS: Just let me see. I did take some notes at that time. I have got eight members that may have been out of their electorate. They could have been in an office, but out of – it is not 100 per cent the answer that you are after, right at the election. It is a slightly different date, so I would need to come back to you exactly, if you like, on opening day on 20 December where we were at at that point in time. I can come back to with that exact number.

Mathew HILAKARI: I know the next election is a long way off, but these leases, from personal experience, do take a long time, particularly where there is a lack of office availability. In a lot of areas in new growth suburbs or one of those areas –

Trish BURROWS: They are very hard.

Mathew HILAKARI: It is really difficult to place. Are there any things that the department can be doing in the lead-up to the next election to make sure offices are in place by that period? I know it is just one of those things that community demand, and they deserve that attention.

Trish BURROWS: Yes and no – yes, we will manage the leases up, and try to ensure as much as possible that we have an office available. Where we have a lease coming to an end just shortly after the election and there is no obvious place to get a new one, we might hold for a while so that we can get input from the member about where they would like to be. There is a little bit of a judgement call about, if the perfect property becomes available, we will probably snap it up – so the perfect size, great security, right near a train station and the bus stop is outside, we will probably snap it up, but if there are a number of options or no clear one, we might wait to get the incoming member's view on things. But we will try as much as we can in that period. There is of course no redistribution next election, so we will not be hampered by that uncertainty as well.

Mathew HILAKARI: Just going through the numbers of new leases by year – 10, five, 20 – is that finalised in that year, or are those ones that have started but not yet finalised?

Trish BURROWS: No. They were ones finalised in that year. That is why I am saying the number.

Mathew HILAKARI: Great. I know that security arrangements have really changed over the last few years. Are you finding that is a challenge when it comes to finding electorate offices or locations that can be available for electorate offices?

Trish BURROWS: Look, in the outer suburbs in particular where there is a lack of high streets, to use a sort of generic term, it can be quite challenging to find electorate offices that fit the standard required in a great access location for constituents to be able to come in. Obviously in the more established suburbs you have got a lot more options, different hubs of activity and economic activity and often a couple of train stations. It becomes much harder further out. Security wise is often not the be-all and end-all of things. It is really about access points and making sure that members and their staff can leave the space as required in a safe way as well, so they are other aspects that we need to take into account.

Mathew HILAKARI: I will just take you to the last page – before you say thank you, of course – and supporting Pacific parliamentarians. What are some of the things that we have taken from some of the Pacific parliaments that have helped us in our understandings and improvements?

Bridget NOONAN: Sure. I think your buzzer is about to go, so I can perhaps provide a –

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Noonan. It is very difficult to see.

Mathew HILAKARI: I might look to another member to finish that question for me.

Bridget NOONAN: Always a Clerk, looking at the clock.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Hilakari. We will go back to Mr McGowan.

Nick McGOWAN: Secretary, I refer you to page 48 of the Department of Parliamentary Services annual report 2022–23. As of 30 June 2023, DPS reported 169 full-time and 19 part-time ongoing staff, of whom 90 are aged 45 or older. Have any of these staff been offered early retirement or redundancy?

Trish BURROWS: No, we have not had an early retirement program at all.

Nick McGOWAN: In respect to the works that are going on – the renovation and modernisation project works – and they commenced obviously way back in 2015 – do you know when the works will be completed?

Trish BURROWS: I just want to be clear which ones you are talking about. Are you talking about the stoneworks around the front of the building?

Nick McGOWAN: The new office and meeting spaces.

Trish BURROWS: The east wing probably is more relevant. The east wing works are due to be completed in 2024–25, in total. That is the completion of those works. The last thing that happens in that area is the stairwell to be completed. So other parts of it will be done, but the final thing that happens is the stairwell to the north. You might have seen works going on in the stairwell to the south. It gets done and then they move to the north stairwell, and it takes quite a long time to complete because of the repair works that need to be done.

Nick McGOWAN: Did the department foresee any delays with the construction or additional costings they did not budget for?

Trish BURROWS: Yes. I think from the start of the project on, that would be definitely the case. A couple of obvious points are: we are in a very old building, so at different points in time when construction does little more than scratch the surface they come upon latent issues that were not expected, and that of course adds both time and cost, and in some cases issues to do with heritage that need to be sorted out before you can progress. There has been significant delay, much of it attributed it to the COVID years, that adds cost as well and time. And then finally the very unusual working environment, because it is a very unusual construction site that gets to do six days then has to pack up and go away and then come back six days later and start again. Every time there is activity here we have to silence the machines, so that is a day where we need to say, 'Construction, you can't work on that day.' So it is an unusual program that they are running to to ensure that we support the work

of the Parliament in the building itself, so that has also caused some delays. I am sure at the time that it was started there was the best view about how to try and work in that construction program, but even a crystal ball would not have foreseen the challenges I think in relation to running a program with those sorts of interventions.

Nick McGOWAN: Do you know the overall cost of the annexe building?

Trish BURROWS: I do not but I can come back to you on that one.

Nick McGOWAN: Okay. Was the department aware of any deficiencies in the quality of the annexe building prior to it being reported in the media? I know there have been some media reports.

Trish BURROWS: Deficiencies – no, not aware of deficiencies. We are aware that for not long after it opened – and to be clear, I was not here at that time but I am aware there have been water ingress issues off and on in different parts of the annexe. Some of those have been fixed by works, and then in other places, trying to do the same fix does not work. So it appears to be, on the face of it, not one cause that can be remedied by one solution. So at the moment we are doing a thorough review of the water ingress in the building and having a consultant come in to do that and have a resolution and also predict where it might come in other occasions, to try and get a fix done – it might take some time, but to get it done for the long term.

Nick McGOWAN: A bit of a gratuitous question here, but I have seen the buckets placed around the precinct – do you know how many water buckets there are?

Trish BURROWS: Water buckets where, sir?

Nick McGOWAN: Catching water in the annexe.

Trish BURROWS: When it rains – I do not know for sure, but I have probably seen five. There are three main points that it happens.

Nick McGOWAN: On security, data released by the Presiding Officers earlier this year shows there were more than 286 security incidents recorded across Parliament and electorate offices, May 2022 to 2023. Do you know how many have been recorded since then?

Trish BURROWS: The slide that was up there – slide number 12 – I think has the summary of the incidents, both at electorate offices and protests on the steps.

Nick McGOWAN: We are not quite sure of how many incidents since May 2022?

Trish BURROWS: No. I would have to come back to you on the exact number since that point.

Nick McGOWAN: Thank you. Are the Presiding Officers aware of the differences between Victoria and all the other states in the Commonwealth in terms of the protections of public officials in the course of their duties?

Trish BURROWS: Sorry, I did not quite hear what you asked then.

Nick McGOWAN: That is okay. Are the Presiding Officers aware of the differences between Victoria and all the other states in the Commonwealth in terms of the protections of public officials in the course of their duties?

Trish BURROWS: You would have to ask the Presiding Officers.

Nick McGOWAN: Are the Presiding Officers or Robert or –

Trish BURROWS: I beg your pardon. Didn't you ask whether the Presiding Officers are aware of something?

Nick McGOWAN: Yes.

Trish BURROWS: I could not comment on whether they aware of something.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr McGowan. We are going to go to Ms Kathage.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you so much, Secretary and clerks. I want to look at the questionnaire that you provided responses to us from on page 6. I am happy to throw this open to everyone. Looking at the ongoing funding for protective security upgrades and service enhancements and when we have disruptions like we saw in the public galleries last week – with those supports for occupational violence training and security awareness training, are you making them available to your staff in Parliament House as well?

Trish BURROWS: The e-learning is available to everyone. I am not sure if they are mandatory. I am looking at Bridget now. We have an OH&S matrix for all training, so every role has designated e-learning and other training that must be done in the workplace. I would need to come back to you about whether those trainings are mandatory for particular roles that work within the chambers – if you like. Security officers and security advisers – yes, they will have done the training, more broadly. But unless the clerks are aware of –

Bridget NOONAN: I am trying madly to think. It is probably worth the committee bearing in mind that some of the staff in this building are employed by me, some by Trish and some by Robert. So we individually have accountabilities to staff and may occasionally exercise those differently, but obviously collectively we would run training programs where like roles have particular risks or challenges. But we can come back to you about the mandatory nature of some of them.

Lauren KATHAGE: The security staff that you referred to earlier – are they required to escort people from the premises out of the galleries?

Trish BURROWS: They are able to escort people from the galleries, as are authorised officers. We do have PSOs in the building pretty much all the time when there is a sitting on. If they are not inside the building, they are just three steps away from the building. Generally, it will be PSOs, as soon as they are present on site, who will step in to have contact with any person who is being required to leave the building.

Lauren KATHAGE: Right. But prior to then other staff could potentially be involved. My understanding is that in other jurisdictions there is enhanced security at the front doors of parliaments rather than roaming PSOs that can leave other staff alone in potentially difficult circumstances. I am trying to remember the graph now, but I think we saw that Parliament disruptions have gone down and EO disruptions have gone up. But nevertheless, at the Parliament have you looked at different ways to ensure the safety of your staff here?

Trish BURROWS: We are constantly reviewing what needs to happen. In opening the galleries earlier this year – I think when that happened there was a lot of work that went into what needed to be in place to ensure that the opening of the galleries would be safe for members but also safe for staff and others – so other members of the public who are sitting nicely in the galleries. A lot of work went into what was required to do that. We are constantly considering what else we can do in relation to both members and the building itself – so property as well – and the people who work here. We have a great relationship with Victoria Police, and they are pretty much in control of protests that might occur on the front steps. They are a source of intelligence for us about what is going on and make us aware of what they know, and vice versa, if we know something – sometimes information will come directly from an electorate officer or from a member because it has come direct to them – we will share that information as well. But you are quite right to point out that it is something that we have to be really consciously aware of all the time and make sure that we do not lapse in those situations and that our staff are always feeling like they are in a safe environment.

Lauren KATHAGE: And then, for members, we have had the opportunities to sort of discuss or debrief following the events last week. Have your staff had a chance to talk about any distress or fear that they have experienced as a result of the disruptions?

Trish BURROWS: From the security guys, I can talk – yes, they had a meeting and talked about the incident. There is a debrief also due, which is a bit of a learning debrief as well about what to do differently that I understand is scheduled in with the chief security officer. For Robert and Bridget's staff I am not sure.

Robert McDONALD: We regularly have debriefs after sitting weeks, where we go through the events of the week and support our staff. I think the President made some comments at the start of the sitting on Thursday about the impact that this can have, when there are disruptions in the gallery, on staff. So Anne and I are regularly checking in on staff to make sure that they feel supported in their roles.

Lauren KATHAGE: I guess I am especially mindful that notwithstanding buckets in the annex, which do not bother me, that is a very secure building that members can easily access, whereas for other staff they do not necessarily have somewhere different to go. So it is good that you are looking at ways to make sure that staff have increased capacity and support, but also it sounds like you are looking at the building as well and different models of security on the precinct. That is great.

And we do love the youth and the Youth Parliament. At this year's Youth Parliament I was lucky enough to have a member –

The CHAIR: We might get back to that one, Ms Kathage. Apologies. I will go back to the Deputy Chair.

Nick McGOWAN: Secretary, as you were saying, basically the facade of the east wing is done. Is the department doing any consultation on what the next major projects might be?

Trish BURROWS: Well, there is always a wish list, isn't there?

Nick McGOWAN: Just provide a copy of that list; that would be great.

Trish BURROWS: I need to pull it out of my head.

Nick McGOWAN: I have got a long list. I can add to it.

Trish BURROWS: Maybe what I can say is one of the core things is that as the stoneworks complete – now, they have been going for almost 20 years, I am going to say, around the whole building – there have been a lot of what might be considered minor works, but because they have disturbed the inside of the building so much there have been a number of things just put on hold that you might describe as a good clean-up, a good scrub, a good paint, et cetera that we need to get on and do inside, given that that has been put on hold, rightly so, while that disturbance is happening outside. It obviously affects inside.

There are also other things that always need to happen. The lift on the Legislative Assembly side really needs to be replaced. We are hoping that will happen in the next 12 months. It is out of order very frequently, and I think right now. There is a bit of a chance there to make it a little bit more accessible as well, so that is important to do. We are looking at the moment at some of our technology infrastructure as well and how we make sure that that has got a resilience attached to it. So some of those things will be visible to members and users of the building and others are more behind the wall and trying to make sure things keep functioning.

Nick McGOWAN: Thank you. There are a few things. On page 96 of the *Department of Parliamentary Services Annual Report 2022–23*, the accumulated depreciation from property, plant and equipment in 2022–23 was \$48.697 million in figure 1. In the last Liberal–Nationals government, depreciation was 'returned' to the Parliament for building works. Does this policy still apply, do you know?

Trish BURROWS: Yes.

Nick McGOWAN: It does.

Trish BURROWS: That is my understanding.

Nick McGOWAN: Great. Thank you.

Trish BURROWS: I can confirm that that – looking at Bridget – yes.

Nick McGOWAN: The Tasmanian and New South Wales parliaments house museums. Has consideration been given to develop part of the now unused ground floor for a similar purpose?

Trish BURROWS: Not to my knowledge.

Nick McGOWAN: What advice has the department sought on how to improve security within Parliament House?

Trish BURROWS: Well, this is of course a little bit tricky, any time you want to talk about security. Maybe what I can say is that we were lucky enough to employ a new chief security officer not so long ago. We have

asked him to have a bit of a belts-and-braces look around the building and our policies. We also test the security every now and again to see whether that is functioning and if we will be able to improve communication and also how we go about security. I would like to think we have a very open-door approach – that if people notice things or have ideas, that we are very open to those and look at what is possible, restricted in this building somewhat by wanting to maintain the nature of the building itself, and its openness as a public house means that it was not ever designed to be that secure facility. If you go to APH in Canberra, when it was designed, security was already an issue so that could be thought about at the time; here we are retrofitting all the time. But it is a matter that is under constant review, and when we get the chance to work with new people or work with VicPol or test the system, we take that opportunity.

Nick McGOWAN: Thank you. This goes to the question you have just been asked a little bit, but nonetheless: at earlier inquiries of this committee members sought information about the desirability of replacing private security guards with PSOs or a dedicated police presence. For example, in response to a question by Mr O'Brien at the hearing at PAEC 16 May 2022, Mr Brooks indicated the new Secretary was looking at implementing permanent security employees at Parliament. Given heightened security risks, has this been revisited?

Trish BURROWS: It has happened. In about August this year we brought on board employees as security officers. The people that you are walking past at the front doors now and the back door are parliamentary officers, so they are now our employees. We do need to still use a service provider during sitting weeks because of the long hours and the extra demand of events, but previously that security was provided under a services contract with Wilson Security. We have now brought that in-house and have our own security officers and team leader. The advantages of that are that as parliamentary officers, one, they have got the same code of conduct and responsibilities that we have. We can of course direct staff to undertake other things, whether it is a walk through the building because there is a particular activity going on or going to check a door that is throwing up an alarm, so they are available to do that. Security officers are often the first contact for members of the public with the building: you come up the front steps and they are often the first people you see. So having a security officer with a focus also on customer service was very important to put in place, and we have now implemented that.

Nick McGOWAN: Thank you. Can you tell me how many other times the Victorian Parliament, both upper and lower houses, has been suspended in 2023?

Trish BURROWS: I will leave that for the clerks.

Bridget NOONAN: Just in 2023?

Robert McDONALD: I will probably have to take that on notice, but we can get you that figure.

Bridget NOONAN: And the same for the Assembly.

Nick McGOWAN: Okay. And do you mind providing any historical data on the number of suspensions in previous years?

Robert McDONALD: Yes.

Bridget NOONAN: Yes.

Nick McGOWAN: Thank you.

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

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Chair. Thank you all for joining us today. I would like to pick up from where Ms Kathage and Mr McGowan were going, just briefly. We have talked a lot about disruptors and security issues that can occur outside and within the Parliament. If there is an incident within the Parliament and a member has actually egged that on or contributed to that in some way – obviously in the balance between an elected representative and the DPS and also the Clerks your obligation is to keep your staff safe. If that member is encouraging the behaviour and also disrespecting the parliamentary staff and their right to be safe, how do you manage that?

Trish BURROWS: Do you want to –

Bridget NOONAN: Yes, I will have a go at it. I do not want to speculate too much, but I can step through some aspects of your question. The psychological wellbeing and physical safety of our staff is really important, so if a member conducted themselves in a way that actually put my staff at risk or caused a threat, there are various steps that I would take as the employer of those staff with an obligation to keep them safe. Those steps would depend on what the nature of that threat was, so I just want the committee to have confidence, and I am sure Robert and Trish would take the same approach with staff employed in their department.

In terms of a nexus, whether a member was involved in a protest, ultimately I think that – not ultimately, but at the outset, that is probably a consideration for that member's house as to a fact-finding mission of some kind, because ultimately it is only the member's house that can sanction a member – well, not only the house, but that would be the first port of call. Do you want to elaborate on that? Would you take a different approach?

Robert McDONALD: No. I think that is the challenge. I suppose obviously having conversations with members and explaining to them the impact that that may have on our staff is also something that we would do, but there is a causal nexus. That is something that the houses or a committee would have to look into. The Presiding Officers also have some powers over the precinct, where they will work with us to manage the risks. They have from time to time closed public galleries or limited access to certain spaces in order to assist us with providing a safe workplace.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. Secretary, and depending on who the right person to put this question to is, but I understand that there are changes coming up in terms of staff structures in the chambers, certainly at least in the Council with the replacement of the principal attendant's role. I understand that is to be turned into the deputy usher role, if I am correct. What is the rationale for this change?

Robert McDONALD: That is something that is in the Department of the Legislative Council, so that is under my purview. We recently undertook a service review of the Usher of the Black Rod's office to look at the role of that office and also the attendant team that sits under that office and to look at the way that we deliver services to the chamber and also to members. There is a greater focus now on security, on OH&S and on various other governance meetings that the Usher of the Black Rod's office is involved in, and we undertook a resource review to kind of look at 'Have we got the structure right?' We decided we needed to add some additional resources and also some I suppose more senior resources to that team. As part of a service review, we actually got a consultant in to assist us with that. Some of the recommendations came to look at restructuring some of those roles. We accepted those recommendations and have gone through a process of consultation of change under our enterprise agreement to look at changing into a new structure, and we are working with the team to move to that.

Michael GALEA: Sure, thank you. Do you expect any roles to be made redundant as part of that process?

Robert McDONALD: There will some roles that are made redundant. No staff member themselves will be left without a position. The new Deputy Usher of the Black Rod started his first day today. We will then fill a couple of coordinator roles, and then everybody in the team will be offered a chamber services officer role. For those where that is at a slightly different classification to their existing role, they will be offered salary maintenance, so nobody will lose any pay. But I believe it is open to staff in the team to say they do not want to take on that new role, in which case there are other options for them. If they want to continue to work for the Parliament, everybody has the option of continuing to work for the Parliament, but we are having conversations with each of the individuals to work out what they believe is the best outcome for them.

Michael GALEA: Sure, thank you. I also understand – not quite as exciting perhaps as the parliamentary museum, but we do have a gift shop already. I understand that we are the only parliament in Australia that does not have its gift shop online. Are there any plans to change that?

Trish BURROWS: Yes, we do have in the medium term a review of the gift shop and how that works. The Australian Parliament House recently did a full review of their gift services, and we have learned a little bit from them. We will be looking at how it works, how the sales go and what we can do to improve that.

Michael GALEA: Great, thank you. I have a little bit of time left.

Nick McGOWAN: Any plans for Starbucks?

Michael GALEA: Please, no. We do not want that in here.

Trish BURROWS: Starbucks? No, there are no plans for Starbucks.

Michael GALEA: We drink proper coffee in Melbourne, Mr McGowan. Finally, I understand, as you would be aware, there has been quite a significant bit of media interest in a story relating to Sprite, the parliamentary dog, who has been disinvited from the library. Whose decision was that?

Trish BURROWS: Mine.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. I think that is my time.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Galea. I am going to throw to myself, with the hat of Ms Sandell on, and I am just going to read out Ms Sandell's questions.

Nick McGOWAN: Does that mean I am the Chair?

The CHAIR: Do not get too excited, Mr McGowan. Secretary, back in June at budget estimates I asked where the parliamentary advisers employment agreement is up to. The old agreement ended on 30 June this year, and advisers are still waiting for a new one. Could you please provide an update on where the new agreement is at?

Trish BURROWS: Yes. Part of the discussion with most of the employers – is probably how I can describe it with parliamentary advisers – was to do a comparative analysis in relation to those roles and others. That has taken much longer than anticipated. We are expecting that analysis to be finished in the next couple of weeks. The collective agreement continues. It is a notional end date, so the terms and conditions continue through that period. We have just been trying to do a bit of work to see if there are some other opportunities available within that agreement that we could present.

The CHAIR: Okay. Thank you. I just want to take your attention now to something quite different: live captioning. Providing live captioning on the Parliament live stream would increase accessibility for the public to be able to see what goes on in our chambers and committees. Has there been any work done to investigate the prospect of providing live captions on the Parliament live stream?

Trish BURROWS: Yes. There was a test, or sample run, during the opening of Parliament last year, so that was put together and run at a very high quality, if I can refer to it that way, and also quite expensive. The team are putting together and have looked to see what is possible to do that focuses on communicating what is happening, as opposed to an accurate word-by-word certainty about what is said, in the same way that if you use any of the Microsoft tools and you dictate to that it is fairly accurate but you cannot say it is 100 per cent accurate. The team is currently putting together a business case to be able to get that underway, and we are hoping that that will be ready by the start of the 2024 parliamentary sittings.

The CHAIR: Excellent. And just lastly, we have had several visitors to Parliament recently who have used wheelchairs and had difficulty getting around the building, including with lifts being out of order or not big enough to fit their wheelchairs. I appreciate this as a heritage building, but could you please outline how we are going in terms of making this building accessible to everyone?

Trish BURROWS: The main accessible entrance is through the rear door. It has obviously been hampered quite a bit by the works at the front of the building as well, and probably even more now that they are demobilising because they have taken a bit more land up to demobilise, so it is quite awkward to get around and to the back door. I probably have to go to when the works are finished. When the works are finished the entrance at the back door will take you to that lift that operates at the moment, but you cannot get to it at the moment unless you go the long way around. If you can imagine coming in the back door once the works are done, you will go to the right and be in an accessible lift that will be able to take you to every floor, including the new levels three and four. The lift works they are looking at for the lift on the Legislative Assembly side, as I said, they are trying to see if they can make that a little bit more accessible. It is not possible to make it fully accessible because of the heritage situation in the building, but a little bit wider. That should be able to, as I understand it, fit a wheelchair but maybe not a stretcher, so that sort of thing, so improving the accessibility all

the time. But the focus on wheelchair accessibility really is that back entrance, and we are hoping once these works are done and we can clean that space a little bit better it will be a bit easier to get in, and once the east wing works at the lower ground level are done access to that lift will be fairly quick and fairly easy from the back entrance.

The CHAIR: Okay. Thank you. Ms Sandell, your time is up. Lastly, we are going to go to Mr Tak.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you, Chair. I just would like to continue on in terms of accessibility and note the new website created by Parliament. Has there been an increase in terms of accessibility?

Trish BURROWS: Do you mean data in relation to people accessing it?

Meng Heang TAK: That is right, yes.

Trish BURROWS: I do not know, but I am sure we can grab some data off it, so I am happy to come back with that information.

Meng Heang TAK: In terms of that, what feedback has been received from the public?

Trish BURROWS: In relation to the internet, I am not sure of having any feedback specifically about it. I have had anecdotal feedback from members across government departments that they can find things a little bit more easily now, but I do not have any formal feedback from members of the public.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you. Moving on, what were the biggest lessons learned for parliamentary departments through the COVID-19 pandemic? How are these sorts of lessons being used to inform the current activities with the three departments?

Trish BURROWS: I was not here during the COVID pandemic, so I had better hand to my colleagues.

Robert McDONALD: I have recently joined the Council from the Assembly. But the one thing that I learned was where there is a will, there is a way, so I think there was very much a desire from members to continue to be able to sit and for committees to continue to be able to meet. I think members from all parties worked very collaboratively on agreeing to new procedural rules and new procedural processes such as remote participation or online committee hearings where they were able to conduct almost entire inquiries online. I think that flexibility – members have embraced that. I think particularly I now see more and more that committees, for example, can have very quick deliberative meetings online where everybody uses the technology. The fact that everyone is not in the room anymore – I think there were some traditionalists previously who thought, you know, committees need to meet and they need to be in person. I think that has kind of broken some barriers and people have got used to that, and it has been a good opportunity for a bit of innovation within the chamber. In the Legislative Council, for example, divisions are done by standing. That was a COVID innovation. That has continued now, and it seems to have been embraced by members. I do not think there is a real desire to go back to crossing to either side of the chamber again. It still is a temporary order but an indefinite temporary order. Bridget?

Bridget NOONAN: Yes, I would echo Robert's comments, and what I noted was the real appetite from members to try and do things differently, as Robert said, because members were so desperate or keen to meet. Even with things like circulating documents, previously you had to be in the chamber to get a physical copy of an amendment – you know, things that we would later put online – but if you were not in the chamber at the time you kind of missed it. So bills, amendments, lists of committee reports and those sorts of things we stopped providing in hard copy or stopped handing them out and moved to then emailing members. I am alert now to the fact that I email you more times a day than is probably tolerable, so that is making me turn my mind to how we push this information out to members in real time electronically and whether that is an app or something like that. But it showed me that, as Robert said, we were not hidebound by tradition, and members had a real appetite to do things differently, which was great.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you. To just continue on that, then, what type of crisis or disaster planning do the parliamentary departments have in place?

Bridget NOONAN: When the pandemic started, we engaged our incident management team under our disaster recovery plan. I think we had probably, and I do not want to speak out of school, always anticipated we

would first really use that in some sort of – you know, the building has had a fire or something physical happening to the building. The crisis was that members were unable to, by and large, come together to meet and staff unable to all be on precinct at the same time, but our incident management team approach actually stood up to managing that challenge and was quite good for communication. So we continue to test that plan – do we do it once a year? I am going to say ‘regularly’ – and do a range of different scenarios, and some of those do not involve everybody. I know Trish’s team, for example, will get some specific maybe cyber risks. We would look at things that have particularly to do with the chamber operations. But I think our approach more or less saw us through the pandemic.

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

The CHAIR: Sorry, Ms Kathage, did you want a question?

Lauren KATHAGE: I just wanted to go back to the Youth Parliament. We had a participant from my electorate who has got a million policy ideas now, so I am not sure whether to thank you for that or not. But it is great to see the young people get really fired up and understand I guess their place in the democracy, and I think your purpose is set down as enabling Victorians to participate in democracy or access democracy. So where does that Youth Parliament sort of rank for you in terms of pride and achievements?

Trish BURROWS: I will just start. Youth Parliament is run by the Y, and the parliamentary departments support them to run it. They have run it for 20-odd years, I think.

Bridget NOONAN: I think so – possibly even longer.

Trish BURROWS: Yes. I think that people almost volunteer to assist with that on top of their day jobs to make that run, as parliamentary officers, so I think the Y would continue to be supported to use the building.

Robert McDONALD: Yes. It is one of many community engagement programs that we offer, so I think there are a range of other activities which we can outline. Is there still time?

The CHAIR: No, there is not.

Robert McDONALD: I was going to say, if there was time, I think Anne had a list of things she could have shared.

Lauren KATHAGE: Apologies. I was waiting for a ‘Yea, time’ on the priority list.

The CHAIR: I am going to call time, just because it has been a long day. Secretary and officials, thank you very much for appearing before the committee this afternoon. The committee is going to follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing, and responses will be required within five working days of the committee’s request. I would also like to thank all secretaries and officers who have given evidence to the committee today, Hansard and the secretariat. The committee will resume its consideration of the 2021–22 and 20–23 financial and performance outcomes tomorrow, on Tuesday 21 November. I declare this hearing adjourned.

Committee adjourned.