Hansard

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL

60th Parliament

Tuesday 3 March 2026

By authority of the Victorian Government Printer

Members of the Legislative Council

60th Parliament

President

Shaun Leane

Deputy President

Wendy Lovell

Leader of the Government in the Legislative Council

Jaclyn Symes

Deputy Leader of the Government in the Legislative Council

Lizzie Blandthorn

Leader of the Opposition in the Legislative Council

Bev McArthur (from 18 November 2025)
David Davis (from 27 December 2024)
Georgie Crozier (to 27 December 2024)

Deputy Leader of the Opposition in the Legislative Council

Evan Mulholland (from 31 August 2023)
Matthew Bach (to 31 August 2023)

Member	Region	Party	Member	Region	Party
Bach, Matthew[1]	North-Eastern Metropolitan	Lib	Luu, Trung	Western Metropolitan	Lib
Batchelor, Ryan	Southern Metropolitan	ALP	Mansfield, Sarah	Western Victoria	Greens
Bath, Melina	Eastern Victoria	Nat	McArthur, Bev	Western Victoria	Lib
Berger, John	Southern Metropolitan	ALP	McCracken, Joe	Western Victoria	Lib
Blandthorn, Lizzie	Western Metropolitan	ALP	McGowan, Nick	North-Eastern Metropolitan	Lib
Bourman, Jeff	Eastern Victoria	SFFP	McIntosh, Tom	Eastern Victoria	ALP
Broad, Gaelle	Northern Victoria	Nat	Mulholland, Evan	Northern Metropolitan	Lib
Copsey, Katherine	Southern Metropolitan	Greens	Payne, Rachel	South-Eastern Metropolitan	LCV
Crozier, Georgie	Southern Metropolitan	Lib	Puglielli, Aiv	North-Eastern Metropolitan	Greens
Davis, David	Southern Metropolitan	Lib	Purcell, Georgie	Northern Victoria	AJP
Deeming, Moira[2]	Western Metropolitan	Lib	Ratnam, Samantha[5]	Northern Metropolitan	Greens
Erdogan, Enver	Northern Metropolitan	ALP	Shing, Harriet	Eastern Victoria	ALP
Ermacora, Jacinta	Western Victoria	ALP	Somyurek, Adem[6]	Northern Metropolitan	Ind
Ettershank, David	Western Metropolitan	LCV	Stitt, Ingrid	Western Metropolitan	ALP
Galea, Michael	South-Eastern Metropolitan	ALP	Symes, Jaclyn	Northern Victoria	ALP
Gray-Barberio, Anasina[3]	Northern Metropolitan	Greens	Tarlamis, Lee	South-Eastern Metropolitan	ALP
Heath, Renee	Eastern Victoria	Lib	Terpstra, Sonja	North-Eastern Metropolitan	ALP
Hermans, Ann-Marie	South-Eastern Metropolitan	Lib	Tierney, Gayle	Western Victoria	ALP
Leane, Shaun	North-Eastern Metropolitan	ALP	Tyrrell, Rikkie-Lee	Northern Victoria	PHON
Limbrick, David[4]	South-Eastern Metropolitan	LP	Watt, Sheena	Northern Metropolitan	ALP
Lovell, Wendy	Northern Victoria	Lib	Welch, Richard[7]	North-Eastern Metropolitan	Lib

[1] Resigned 7 December 2023
[2] IndLib from 28 March 2023 until 27 December 2024
[3] Appointed 14 November 2024
[4] LDP until 26 July 2023
[5] Resigned 8 November 2024
[6] DLP until 25 March 2024
[7] Appointed 7 February 2024

Party abbreviations

AJP – Animal Justice Party; ALP – Australian Labor Party; DLP – Democratic Labour Party;
Greens – Australian Greens; Ind – independent; IndLib – Independent Liberal; LCV – Legalise Cannabis Victoria;
LDP – Liberal Democratic Party; Lib – Liberal Party of Australia; LP – Libertarian Party;
Nat – National Party of Australia; PHON – Pauline Hanson's One Nation; SFFP – Shooters, Fishers and Farmers Party

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The PRESIDENT (Shaun Leane) took the chair at 12:02 pm, read the prayer and made an Acknowledgement of Country.

Bills

Health Safeguards for People Born with Variations in Sex Characteristics Bill 2025

Justice Legislation Amendment (Vicarious Liability for Child Abuse) Bill 2025

Royal assent

The PRESIDENT (12:04): I have received a message from the Governor, dated 24 February:

> The Governor informs the Legislative Council that she has, on this day, given the Royal Assent to the under-mentioned Acts of the present Session presented to her by the Clerk of the Parliaments:
>
> **4/2026** Health Safeguards for People Born with Variations in Sex Characteristics Act 2026
>
> **5/2026** Justice Legislation Amendment (Vicarious Liability for Child Abuse) Act 2026

Questions without notice and ministers statements

Integrity agencies

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (12:04): (1237) My question is to the Treasurer. Treasurer, CFMEU corruption has cost taxpayers $15 billion, and Victoria's integrity agencies do not currently have the money or the powers they need. In a February joint paper the Ombudsman, the Auditor-General and IBAC said:

> Transparency in budget processes is a democratic safeguard. At a time when trust in institutions is under pressure, ensuring integrity agencies are transparently and, by extension, appropriately funded is essential to maintaining public confidence in the system.

I therefore ask, Treasurer: will you provide the necessary funding for these three agencies, or will you continue to starve them?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Regional Development) (12:05): Mr Davis, you referred to a report that has only just been received by the government. As you would appreciate, in my role as Treasurer I have direct –

David Davis: This is the joint paper.

Jaclyn SYMES: Correct. We received that less than two weeks ago.

David Davis interjected.

Jaclyn SYMES: I will take up the interjection, Mr Davis. The current leaders of the three integrity agencies have written to the government. I was one of the recipients less than two weeks ago. It is appropriate to give due consideration to that letter. It is actually different to the earlier report that you referred to, in 2022, and as you have indicated, it is appropriate for government to give due consideration to the requests and information that have been provided by the integrity agencies.

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (12:06): I think we get the impression that they are going to continue to starve them. But I ask on the basis of the minister's response: given the May state budget is now only two months away, will you immediately put in place the independent advice process they have called for, including written reasons for budget outcomes, agency visibility of DTF advice to decision-makers and post-budget debriefs?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Regional Development) (12:07): Mr Davis, I take issue with the characterisation of funding for our integrity agencies. Funding has increased under this government. It is actually double in comparison

to when you left government. As I said in my substantive answer, we will give due consideration to the correspondence that we have received from the integrity agencies.

Integrity agencies

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:08): (1238) My question today is also to the Treasurer. Treasurer, in the funding model proposed by our state's core integrity agencies the Victorian Ombudsman, IBAC and the Victorian Auditor-General's Office a core tenet is increased transparency so that the agencies' budget bids are public, that the funding they receive is then made public and that there is a public explanation for any difference between what they have requested and what they then receive. Treasurer, why isn't this currently the case?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Regional Development) (12:08): Sorry, Mr Puglielli, I only caught half of your question there, but it was similar to that of Mr Davis. You are asking for reforms that have been reflected in some of the correspondence that I have received from the integrity agencies, so my answer is effectively the same as what I gave to Mr Davis.

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:09): Treasurer, yesterday the Victorian Ombudsman revealed that her agency received 39 per cent of the funding given to her New South Wales counterpart. She has half the number of complaint officers compared to New South Wales, and every year she conducts fewer investigations triggered by complaints from the public, due to diminishing resources. Why is Victoria lagging behind New South Wales in these measures?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Regional Development) (12:09): I take issue again with the mischaracterisation of funding for our integrity agencies. To describe it as diminishing resources is just inaccurate, Mr Puglielli. In relation to the question that you have asked, IBAC, Integrity Oversight Victoria and the Victorian Ombudsman have all received funding uplifts in recent years. Again, I gave this information to Mr Davis. The Victorian Ombudsman has nearly doubled in funding since 2014. In terms of the funding arrangements, they are discussed in detail at PAEC and in the Integrity and Oversight Committee, as are some of the issues about the pressures on the organisations. One of the pressures that the organisations raise is referrals from this house. I know that we have got some considerations around funding, duplicate referrals and things like that tomorrow in general business.

Ministers statements: family violence

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ageing, Minister for Multicultural Affairs, Minister for Prevention of Family Violence) (12:10): I rise to update the house on a significant new investment in family violence services announced by our government in partnership with the Albanese Labor government. Governments at all levels must work together if we are going to achieve our goal to end family, domestic and sexual violence, and that is why we are very pleased to have a strong partner in Canberra. On 20 February, alongside the Commonwealth Minister for Social Services Tanya Plibersek, I announced the next stage of our partnership under the federation funding agreement to respond to family, domestic and sexual violence. As part of this agreement Victoria will receive over $89 million of Commonwealth funding over five years, which this government will match dollar for dollar. This funding will deliver critical programs and services to victim-survivors, including children and young people, who too often carry the impact of family violence into their adult lives. We know there are fewer options for young people seeking help on their own without a safe parent to support them. That is why three more years of funding will be provided to the Amplify program, delivered by Melbourne City Mission, and the Aspire program, delivered by Meli, under this new agreement. Both programs address this gap by providing specialist youth-specific support to unaccompanied young people who are experiencing or who are at risk of homelessness due to family violence. But it is not just about responding after harm has occurred. This new agreement also supports investment in prevention and early intervention programs to help stop violence before it happens.

Suburban Rail Loop

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (12:12): (1239) My question is to the Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop. Minister, in the *Australian Financial Review* the Australian Workers' Union expressed concern about your government's decision to allow CFMEU-backed labour hire firms to run rampant on SRL sites. Will you direct the Suburban Rail Loop Authority to provide all subcontractor, payroll and ownership data to the Victorian Infrastructure Delivery Authority to properly vet to ensure that no bikie-affiliated firms are receiving taxpayer funds?

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, Minister for Housing and Building, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (12:12): Mr Mulholland, thank you for your new-found interest in the role that unions play in negotiating fair and safe terms and conditions across worksites around the state. It is really important –

Members interjecting.

Harriet SHING: And it is telling that you do not even want to hear the answer, because you do not want to hear about how we know that in a dangerous sector involving dangerous work, workers are paid through negotiated collective agreements that reflect the value and the technical nature of their work in building the infrastructure that your communities rely upon every single day. Whether that is large-scale transport infrastructure or whether that is the 88 level crossings that have been removed to date, we know that it takes workers to build that work, and these projects have delivered tens of thousands of jobs for people who then get the benefit of a career in building and in construction.

Apparently everybody is a new-found expert on the way in which various rules apply for coverage as it relates to union engagement in the negotiation and resolution of collective agreements. Unions will have their own views on how it is that workplace arrangements and rules apply to them, and there is a well-trodden path to the independent umpire, the Fair Work Commission.

Members interjecting.

The PRESIDENT: Do not bother asking the question. Seriously, do not bother, because you cannot hear the answer.

Members interjecting.

The PRESIDENT: Spare me. The person who asked the question may want to hear it.

Harriet SHING: It is a real shame that you do not actually want to hear about the way in which these major projects are being delivered in a way that also affords those workers fair and safe terms and conditions that reflect the value of what they do. As I had begun to indicate, Mr Mulholland, before you and your colleagues decided that a cacophony was a better way to go with question time than actually listening to the answer, there is a well-trodden path to the independent umpire, the Fair Work Commission, which is charged under the Fair Work Act with the capacity to understand, to interpret and to rule on the way in which various coverage matters apply under the industrial relations system. Mr Mulholland, you would also be well aware that, having referred the vast majority of our industrial relations powers to the Commonwealth, it is appropriate that the federal body and that federal pathway under the national system are the pathway by which we actually advance these matters for resolution.

Evan Mulholland: On a point of order, on relevance, President, VIDA does have probity functions, and my question went to whether the minister would refer the subcontractor and ownership data to VIDA to make sure there were no bikie-affiliated firms on SRL sites. That is what the question was, and the minister has not come near that in her answer.

The PRESIDENT: I believe the minister is being responsive to the question.

Harriet SHING: Mr Mulholland, the way in which you have asked that question and raised that point of order indicates very clearly that you are happy to call the 30,000 workers in construction who are members of the CFMEU criminals. If that is what you are saying, then have the guts to stand up and say it. The independent administrator has been very clear that everybody named in that report no longer works for that organisation. It was placed into administration in order to clean it up. That is exactly what is happening. If you are aware of any issues of criminality or illegal contact or conduct, please refer them to the relevant authorities.

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (12:16): Subcontractors have literally been kicked off SRL sites for demanding bribes and taking bribes. Minister, AWU Victoria secretary Ronnie Hayden is quoted as saying:

> The consortium wants a clause limited to labour hire only, which would effectively give them a green light to engage any subcontractor without scrutiny, including those affiliated with the CFMEU.

Minister, have you received any advice that substantiates Ronnie Hayden's and the AWU's warning about a green light for unvetted subcontractors on the Suburban Rail Loop?

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, Minister for Housing and Building, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (12:17): Thank you, Mr Mulholland. What I will say to you – and it has been said in this chamber before and it has been said across this place before, and I think we need to continue to say it – is that the Victorian Labour Hire Authority is in the position to be able to get right into these matters in relation to the work of contractors and subcontractors, the standards that apply, the fit and proper person test, and the way in which we have also legislated to prevent outlaw motorcycle gang members from entering worksites, and they are in a position to be removed by Victoria Police should they attend a site. Steve Dargavel is doing a power of work, including with a range of others, as it relates to the delivery of major projects, including the Suburban Rail Loop. That work goes on alongside the work in Operation Hawk – 69 charges, 15 people – the independent administrator who is conducting this work. Again, you are very happy to ignore what is happening in favour of the rabbit holes you are going down to make sure that you are casting every worker in construction as a criminal.

David Davis: On a point of order, President, the minister is clearly debating the question. It was a very simple, straightforward question. She has now moved to a serious debate about the matter and is not answering the question.

The PRESIDENT: How would I know? I cannot hear her. I listened to the start of the minister's answer when I could kind of hear her, and she has been relevant to the question she has been asked. I will ask the minister if she wants to continue for her last 6 seconds.

David Davis: Further on the point of order, President, I accept if you cannot hear it, but I did hear what she was saying. She was in a broad ramble, a debate, and not answering the question. I accept you may not have been able to hear clearly, but you may be able to look at the transcript later.

The PRESIDENT: I am not too sure what difference that would make, but I am always happy to look at any transcript anyone invites me to look at.

Harriet SHING: To describe workers' terms and conditions as a broad ramble, Mr Davis, speaks volumes to the way in which you hold them – in no regard whatsoever.

David Davis: On a point of order, President, again the minister is debating the question and not answering the question directly. It was a very narrow question.

The PRESIDENT: No, I did say that I believed in the part of her answer I could hear she was relevant to the question.

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (12:19): I move:

> That the minister's answer be taken into consideration on the next day of meeting.

Motion agreed to.

Victims of crime

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:20): (1240) My question is for the Minister for Victims, represented in this place by the Minister for Corrections. The victims of crime commissioner plays a pivotal role in promoting the fair treatment of victims in the justice system, including those subjected to police misconduct. This role is independent of government, and it was designed that way so it would not be beholden to any departments or agencies. Yet the government recently confirmed it was working on a proposal to absorb the victims of crime commissioner's office into the Department of Justice and Community Safety, threatening its independence and leading to current and past commissioners publicly voicing their concerns. Can the minister advise why they are considering a proposal that could cause harm to victims and reduce police oversight?

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation, Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice) (12:20): I thank Ms Payne for her question and her interest in this matter. I will make sure that is referred on to the Minister for Police in the other place for an appropriate response.

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:21): I thank the minister for referring that on. By way of supplementary, in November 2023 the victims of crime commissioner tabled a report titled *Silenced and Sidelined: Systemic Inquiry into Victim Participation in the Justice System*. This report made 55 recommendations to government on improving victim participation in the justice system. None have been responded to. Will the minister advise whether they will respond to this report before the commissioner's office is absorbed into the department?

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation, Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice) (12:21): I thank Ms Payne for her supplementary question. I will make sure that is passed on to the Minister for Police in the other place for response.

Ministers statements: bushfires

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation, Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice) (12:21): I know I speak on everyone's behalf when I say our thoughts are with everyone who has been affected by the recent bushfires, particularly the family of Maxwell Hobson, who sadly lost his life. Bushfires cause devastation for so many people, but at the same time these emergencies also bring out the very best in Victorians. Recovery from disasters requires everyone to band together, and over recent weeks we have seen ordinary Victorians come together to provide practical help and assistance to people in need. This includes those in our regional correctional facilities who are doing their bit to assist with bushfire recovery. Corrections Victoria's environmental program Landmate has been active in fire-affected communities, particularly around Streatham. Landmate is a highly successful initiative that has provided support for environmental projects throughout Victoria for over 25 years. This includes small groups of minimum-security prisoners working under close supervision to replace fences on fire-affected farms. This program has helped prisoners develop real-world skills and give back to the community while also providing practical help for those in need. The important work they do is helping our farmers contain livestock and maintain their livelihoods.

I want to take this opportunity to also acknowledge the advocacy of the member for Ripon in the other place for helping more local farmers to access this valuable support. Regional prisons have donated over 170 bales of feed harvested from prison farms. This will go directly to fire-affected farmers to help them feed their livestock over the coming months. Recovering from emergencies requires a whole-of-community response, and sometimes that help comes from unexpected places. Finally, I want to thank our hardworking corrections officers that support these important programs and make a difference for communities across our state.

Syrian repatriations

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (12:23): (1241) My question is to the Minister for Multicultural Affairs. Minister, following the Premier's refusal to answer questions on the return of ISIS brides and their children into Australia, it has been reported that most of the women and their children were planning to resettle in Victoria. A government spokesperson confirmed that the Premier has known of these plans since September. Minister, when did you first become aware of the resettlement plans?

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ageing, Minister for Multicultural Affairs, Minister for Prevention of Family Violence) (12:24): I thank Ms Crozier for her question. I do find it interesting that it is coming from Ms Crozier and not the shadow, who is in the same chamber. I note that he is very exercised about these issues. I want to say a few things about this, because I think it is important that we get a few facts on the public record about this matter. In any situation like this that involves this kind of complexity, whether it is overseas or in our country, the last thing we want to do is take up the temperature and continue to see division within our community. I want to say that our approach to these issues has always been to try to support those communities that are most impacted by these issues, not seek headlines or seek to make political points about these matters. I can absolutely understand that there are parts of our community who would be deeply distressed by some of the issues and the horrors of ISIS. Indeed many of our communities here in Victoria have had to flee the persecution associated with some of these groups. But whether you are a Middle Eastern Christian or a Muslim, there is no hierarchy of trauma when it comes to these deeply distressing and complex issues. Every crisis should not be used as an opportunity to divide the community.

I think that what is important here is to acknowledge that these matters, as those opposite know very well, fit squarely within the remit of the Commonwealth government. Victoria does not issue passports. Victoria does not determine citizenship. Our responsibilities are very clear. We work with Victoria Police. We coordinate with our federal authorities in that regard. We keep Victorians safe.

Georgie Crozier: On a point of order, President, I have been listening to the minister's answer very closely, and I think Victorians right across the state are concerned about this issue. My question was very specific and very narrow. I would ask you to ask the minister to come back to the specifics of what I asked: when did she know?

Ingrid STITT: I thank the member for her interjection. I was in the process of talking about how important it is to foster social cohesion in our state. We have seen far too much division in the community over the last two or three years when it comes to issues related to conflicts beyond our shores. The point I am making to the member and to those opposite –

Georgie Crozier: On a point of order, President, there are 14 seconds to go. The minister has had close to 3 minutes to answer this question, and I would ask you to ask the minister to answer the question that has been asked.

Members interjecting.

The PRESIDENT: Order! The minister to continue.

Ingrid STITT: Thank you, but I will not engage in this sort of rhetoric, and I will not divide our communities and pit people against each other. It is very simple, Ms Crozier: the federal government are responsible for our borders. The federal government have been very clear about this issue.

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (12:27): I am quite astonished by the minister's refusal to answer a very simple question.

Members interjecting.

Georgie CROZIER: No, the community has a right to know.

Nick McGowan interjected.

Georgie CROZIER: Mr McGowan, please be quiet.

Socio-Cultural Syriac Incorporated Association president Mukhles Habash has said his members are all victims of the terrorist organisation –

Ingrid Stitt: On a point of order, President, I could not hear Ms Crozier. Could she begin the supplementary again, please?

The PRESIDENT: Yes. Reset the clock, please.

Georgie CROZIER: Minister, Socio-Cultural Syriac Incorporated Association president Mukhles Habash has said his members are all victims of the terrorist organisation ISIS and:

> The presence or return of individuals linked to such extremist ideology could threaten the sense of safety for our children in the future …

Given that last year when two ISIS brides were resettled in Melbourne the government failed to consult with affected communities like the Assyrian, Chaldean, Yazidi, Druze and Shia Muslims who escaped ISIS persecution and found a new home here in Victoria, can you confirm you have consulted with these communities on this particular issue?

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ageing, Minister for Multicultural Affairs, Minister for Prevention of Family Violence) (12:29): I completely reject the way that you have framed that question, because at its heart it questions whether I as the Minister for Multicultural Affairs or indeed our government has listened to the community. I can tell you that we are out every single day listening to the concerns of our community, including our diverse communities, and the one thing that I do know is they do not want to have these issues continue to be used as a political weapon for those opposite. My role as Minister for Multicultural Affairs in this state is to keep our communities safe and to keep our communities from conflict – brought on by those opposite, in most cases. Of course, as I have already indicated in my substantive answer, there is deep distress about these issues in parts of our community. I have also indicated that those that have been subject to ISIS and their oppressive regimes – *(Time expired)*

North Richmond medically supervised injecting room

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (12:30): (1242) My question is to the Minister for Mental Health. Last year in an answer to a question about the Richmond injecting room you told this place:

> … we continue to engage with the North Richmond community … but also through the $13 million of investment that we have made to the safety and amenity upgrades in that precinct. That has included improved CCTV coverage …

Yet the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing now says cameras in this area were decommissioned in 2021. That was five years ago. Why did you mislead the house on the improved CCTV in the North Richmond precinct?

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ageing, Minister for Multicultural Affairs, Minister for Prevention of Family Violence) (12:31): I thank Ms Crozier for her question, and I absolutely reject the premise of her question. We have been working very closely and very hard across not just my portfolio but other portfolios as well to make sure that the North Richmond housing precinct has the support that it needs, particularly when it comes to amenity and when it comes to security. We have made significant investments not only around security across that housing estate but also in the vicinity of the medically supervised injecting room.

It is of course worth noting that the opposition have taken every opportunity to run down this important health service. This is a service that has saved lives and has avoided thousands and thousands of overdoses. I reject the premise of Ms Crozier's question, because really it is all about punching down

on the most vulnerable people in our community, and there seems to be a bit of a theme around that today in their questions in QT.

What I will say is that our government will continue to work closely with the medically supervised injecting room and with the North Richmond Community Health service, because we know that the services that they provide some of the most vulnerable in our community are absolutely critical, and we also know that the community understand the importance of these services. We have a really strong engagement between the MSIR, the community health service and the local residents of the housing estate and the immediate area. We continue to engage regularly. Most of the agencies that are involved in crisis response around that part of Richmond are also involved in that committee. That is the place, frankly, where issues are dealt with and where solutions are sought across the community. I am proud of the work that that group is doing, because it is all about making sure that when there are issues on the precinct they are dealt with in a way that continues to have a sharp focus on safety and amenity for the whole community.

I reject the premise of Ms Crozier's question, and I do note that none of the approaches of those opposite are about the health and wellbeing of anybody who uses that facility in North Richmond.

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (12:33): I note the minister's answer again, and she is extremely defensive. She keeps attacking the opposition. We have a right to ask questions on behalf of the community, Minister, and we will continue to do so. Whether you reject the premise of the question or not, I am not interested; I just want a decent answer from you, so let us try again. Minister, the CCTV cameras were installed by the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing 'to support the security and safety of residents'. Lennox Street residents recently witnessed another violent attack outside the injecting room, where a woman was punched in the face by a man, then mauled by his dog. The incident was not captured on CCTV because the cameras were not working. You said measures to improve the safety and security of residents included CCTV. When were you first briefed that the CCTV was not working?

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ageing, Minister for Multicultural Affairs, Minister for Prevention of Family Violence) (12:34): I thank Ms Crozier for her supplementary question. I have already said that I reject the premise of the question, and that is because the facts are wrong – basically, you are wrong. The information you have is incorrect. The cameras have not been offline. The advice that I have is that there are several cameras that cover the North Richmond Community Health service and that all cameras operating in the North Richmond Community Health site are currently operating and none have been offline. I really question the motive behind Ms Crozier's line of questioning here, when the basic facts cannot actually stand up to any scrutiny.

Ministers statements: early childhood education and care

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (12:35): I rise to update the house on the historic agreement the Allan Labor government has reached with the Albanese government for early childhood education infrastructure. The agreement provides $170 million in joint funding, providing for 11 early learning centres across Victoria's outer suburbs and in the regions in areas where they are needed most. Just the other week I was pleased to attend our Early Learning Victoria Garrong site in Kings Park, joined by the Commonwealth Minister for Education Jason Clare and the minister for early childhood Jess Walsh, to celebrate this historic agreement. The Australian government is investing $63 million across a range of projects through the $1 billion Building Early Education Fund. The Allan Labor government is contributing $107 million. This investment will support the building or expansion of early childhood education and care services across Victoria, including in Kings Park, Wedderburn, Weir Views, Geelong, Whittlesea, Casey, Frankston and Swan Hill. We are making this investment because we know how important it is to support the delivery of early childhood services in areas of greatest need, improving the education of some of our youngest learners. Services will be delivered progressively over the coming years, with

new Early Learning Victoria services in Kings Park, Wedderburn and Weir Views recently opened. Two services will come online in 2027, four services in 28 and a further two in 29.

This further investment is aligned with the Allan Labor government's nation-leading $14 billion Best Start, Best Life reforms. As we know, our Best Start, Best Life reforms are transforming early childhood education to help children thrive, save families money and support parents and carers to return to work or study if they choose. It is also building and expanding hundreds of kindergartens across Victoria, providing 50 Early Learning Victoria centres and supporting the delivery of 15 hours of three-year-old kindergarten each week by 2029 and up to 30 hours of pre-prep each week by 2036.

Ballarat car parking

Joe McCRACKEN (Western Victoria) (12:37): (1243) My question is to the Minister for Regional Development. In September 2024 I asked the Minister for Regional Development, the then minister, Ms Tierney, about parking in Ballarat. The commitment that I was given then, and I quote directly from *Hansard*, was that there will be:

> … 120 car park spaces at the Ballarat GovHub … and they will become available next year.

Minister, 2025 has come and gone, and the 120 car park spaces have not been delivered as promised by your department. Why not?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Regional Development) (12:38): I thank Mr McCracken for his question. We have had a conversation about car parks in Ballarat a couple of times. There has been the delivery of over 2000 car parks in and around Ballarat CBD by this government, including around 14,000 free parking spaces.

A member interjected.

Jaclyn SYMES: 1400. Obviously this is all about supporting the jobs and economic growth of this regional city. It includes 147 completed car parks in the CBD, over 400 opened at the Ballarat Base Hospital and another 1400, as I said, through the Ballarat station redevelopment and the council's smarter parking program. The Ballarat GovHub features a two-storey underground car park. The car park spaces were required based on the capacity of the building and were designed to meet the specific business needs of the GovHub tenants to house Victorian government vehicles. You would be aware of some of the tenants in there and some of the issues that they have to contend with. RDV are working across government to understand how an increase in demand from GovHub tenants will impact the number of car parking spaces that could be available for use by the public. We will continue to work on this issue and update the Ballarat community as these works progress.

Joe McCRACKEN (Western Victoria) (12:39): Minister, I reject the premise of your response because I asked you whether they had been delivered or not. They clearly have not been delivered, and you did not say that. They have not been delivered, because they are not accessible to the public. So my question to you as a supplementary is: Minister, according to a Ballarat *Courier* article that was published just last week, your department would not even commit to giving a timeline for when those parking spaces will be delivered; why not, when they are already overdue?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Regional Development) (12:40): Mr McCracken, the premise of my answer was to provide you with details about car parks. I can go through a breakdown of all of the new government car parks funded in Ballarat for you, because I have got a list here: Ballarat hospital and Ballarat GovHub, 520 free parks; City of Ballarat smarter parking program, 437 parks.

Joe McCracken: On a point of order, President, my question was very specific to GovHub parking, and that is why I mentioned –

Members interjecting.

Joe McCracken: Can I please do my point of order? I mentioned 120 car parking spaces at GovHub in Ballarat. That is what I mentioned, and I am asking for a response on that particular car park, please.

The PRESIDENT: I will call the minister back to the question.

Jaclyn SYMES: I was providing you more details, Mr McCracken, because I answered your supplementary question in the substantive answer, where I specifically talked to you about the GovHub, its tenants and the two-storey car park that is at that facility. So maybe refer back to my answer to your substantive question, and then we can follow up, if you have got any more details that you want, because I have provided you with the information that you asked for.

Liquor regulation

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (12:41): (1244) My question is for the Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation. On 6 September 2024 national cabinet recognised the clear link between alcohol and intimate partner and family violence incidents and announced that the Australian and state and territory governments would be implementing recommendation 17 of the *Unlocking the Prevention Potential: Accelerating Action to End Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence* report. Among other things, recommendation 17 states that governments will:

> … prevent and reduce –

domestic family and sexual violence –

> … including homicide, with a focus on alcohol and gambling industries … This should include:
>
> a. adopting clear primary objectives in state and territory liquor regulatory regimes to prevent gender-based violence, alongside existing objectives around alcohol harm reduction …
>
> b. restrictions on alcohol sales, delivery timeframes … and advertising

In particular there was a focus on online alcohol sales. Minister, with this in mind, why haven't you implemented reforms to the Liquor Control Reform Act, as committed to in 2024?

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation, Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice) (12:42): I thank the member for their question and their interest in these matters. I think they have touched on a number of points of really important work, and it also gives me an opportunity to reflect that our government recognises the serious and often tragic link between alcohol and gender-based violence. We are taking steps to reduce those harms. Through our strengthening women's safety package, we have funded Liquor Control Victoria to deliver new responsible service of alcohol training, and this training is all about equipping venue staff to identify and respond to sexual violence, harassment and family violence. This training is mandatory now for all new licensees and staff working at late-night venues, bars, hotels and bottle shops, and it will be delivered at no cost for an accessible online module. We have also updated decision-making guidelines for late-night licences, and since 2023, the Victorian Liquor Commission must now consider whether venues have a plan to prevent and respond to gendered violence when assessing new applications in four inner-city LGAs.

This is an issue that the government is across; we have already taken a number of steps and actions. But in relation to your specific questions about the online harm and in particular the service delivery – I understand they are the two specific questions to your substantive – we are working very closely to protect vulnerable individuals from harm, but we are also committed to getting the balance right, and that includes ensuring that alcohol delivery services operate responsibly and in line with regulations. The sector already has a self-regulated model at the moment. They have a relatively high compliance rate, but there are still risks, and as a government we have made a number of reforms aimed at reducing harm from alcohol, including laws that regulate the online ordering and delivery of liquor. We will continue to monitor the effectiveness of some of these policies. I do note and give a shout-out to the

Malinauskas government, which has made an announcement in relation to this area. We will look at the effectiveness of some of those reforms, and we will continue to minimise harm where we can.

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (12:44): You made specific commitments about updating the regulations around these things. There was no commitment there other than 'We'll look at it.' But alcohol reforms in Victoria were again recommended by the coroner in 2025, following their investigation into the tragic death of 30-year-old Kathleen Arnold, who was found dead in her Heidelberg home as a result of alcohol poisoning. The coroner had found that she had bought 319 alcohol-based products via delivery services in the last six months before her death, so that does not sound like a self-regulatory model that is working well. The coroner recommended that an online alcohol delivery curfew and cool-down period between orders be implemented. Minister, will you commit to amending the Liquor Control Reform Act to address the concerns raised by the coroner and in line with the commitments that you made at national cabinet in 2024, by the end of this term?

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation, Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice) (12:45): I thank the member for their supplementary question. The government is committed to keeping all Victorians safe, and we have already made the important reforms. An example I gave in my answer to the substantive was the changes we made to the RSA – responsible service of alcohol – training. But of course the national cabinet process is underway, and I know there are many steps across the country. We are closely monitoring those developments. I believe that we do need a uniform approach to the issue. Alcohol harm does not just stop at the border; it is a national issue, and we do need a national approach. I gave an example of some of the reforms that South Australia committed to. But I think our position is that we need to make sure we strike the right balance, and we need to do both steps: we need to make sure that there is harm minimisation, but we also need to make sure we do not drown the legitimate sector with red tape as well. So there is I think a balance in these policy areas, and I am committed to making sure we have the most effective policies possible.

Ministers statements: housing

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, Minister for Housing and Building, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (12:46): We do not get a city or a state that is more affordable, fairer, more livable or safer by hope alone, and as the challenge of finding a home to buy or rent becomes bigger around Australia and around the world, Victoria is building thousands more homes than any other state and leading the nation when it comes to first home buyers. Labor is building new homes, for example, at the Fitzroy Gasworks. Fitzroy Gasworks will be a new neighbourhood with the works: diverse and affordable homes close to public transport, a senior high school, open space, multi-use sports centres and commercial spaces.

Last month, with Local: Residential and the Inner North Collective Joint Venture, I announced that Fitzroy Gasworks will now include 1400 new homes, with a minimum of 20 per cent of those homes being affordable and social housing. That is 200 more homes than originally planned. And earlier today we celebrated the official opening of the new Bundha Sports Centre at Fitzroy Gasworks. The centre has four competition-level courts for netball, basketball and volleyball, a futsal court, gymnasium, cafe and flexible community spaces. Combined with two courts at neighbouring Wurun Senior Campus, we now have a seven-court facility available to the community outside school hours for thousands of people to visit each week.

Labor knows that growth is inevitable but good growth is a choice, and growth should not be the sole responsibility of every part of Melbourne except the Liberals' leafy inner suburbs, where it seems like we are in a situation of 'anywhere but Brighton' or 'keep out of Kew'. Labor knows that the best way to make housing more affordable and fairer for young Victorians is to build more homes. And with the Liberals and the Greens, actions speak louder than words. They have time and time again blocked and opposed the delivery of reforms and supply that people are looking for when finding a home to buy or rent. Victorians, quite frankly, deserve better.

Written responses

The PRESIDENT (12:48): I thank Minister Erdogan: regarding Ms Payne's questions to the Minister for Victims, he will follow those up.

Georgie Crozier: On a point of order, President, I would ask that my substantive question be reinstated, given the minister did not answer it.

The PRESIDENT: I will review that and get back to the house before the end of the day.

Constituency questions

Southern Metropolitan Region

John BERGER (Southern Metropolitan) (12:49): (2173) My constituency question is directed to the Minister for Education in the other place. Last year Victoria saw some of the best VCE results across the nation, with an outstanding completion rate of 97.3 and an increased number of students in this cohort, up approximately 3500 from 2024. I am proud to note that some of the highest achieving schools of 2025 are located in my electorate of Southern Metropolitan Region, including Melbourne High School, Bialik College, Camberwell Girls Grammar, Fintona Girls' School and more. The Allan Labor government's investment into education in the 2025–26 state budget was $4.9 billion, because we all know that high-quality education throughout childhood and adolescence is paramount for future success. The foundations for success are built on early learning, including primary school, and I am glad to note that Camberwell Primary School is undergoing upgrades and modernisation of its main building, projected for completion in late 2026. The project was funded through the then Andrews Labor government, with a 2023–24 state budget investment of $24 million into planning school upgrades, and through the 2024–25 state budget Camberwell Primary received a share of $9.7 million to undergo these works. My question to the Minister for Education is: how are the construction works at Camberwell Primary School progressing at this stage?

Northern Victoria Region

Gaelle BROAD (Northern Victoria) (12:51): (2174) My question is for the Minister for Energy and Resources regarding the removal of compressed natural gas from 10 regional communities. I previously raised this issue on behalf of residents and note the minister's response, which raised more questions than it answered. Despite the government being informed of the issues with delivery by Solstice in 2023, the government has now left residents facing increased costs, limited time to change over and no compensation for the removal of the service, despite the contract being cut short 10 years early. Solstice are covering costs for like-for-like appliances for customers moving to LPG, but the government's rebate system for electric appliances is overly complicated, with variable rebates causing confusion. Time is running out for residents, with plans to cut off the service. Of the 1183 residential and business customers directly impacted, how many are yet to change, and what is the government doing to ensure that residents and businesses are compensated for the removal of this service and not left out of pocket?

Northern Metropolitan Region

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO (Northern Metropolitan) (12:52): (2175) My constituency question is for the Minister for Housing and Building. Minister, my constituent Hanan Ali of Craigieburn recently visited my office. She has lived in her two-storey Housing Choices townhouse since 2014, having moved in while pregnant with her second child. The property is overcrowded and highly unsuitable. The rooms are small. There is no proper shower, only a narrow bathtub, from which family members have fallen, and daily tasks are difficult, especially while caring for children, including one who requires extensive medical care. Over the years Hanan has developed chronic back pain from using the stairs. She has repeatedly requested a four-bedroom, single-storey home but has been asked to reapply for a special condition allocation. She reports that she is devastated and stressed. She cannot sleep at night, and it has become a mental stress on top of her health issues. Minister, will you take

urgent steps to ensure Hanan and her family can access safe, adequate housing without repeated delays?

Southern Metropolitan Region

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (12:53): (2176) My question is to the Minister for Consumer Affairs. How is the Allan Labor government helping constituents in Southern Metropolitan Region save when they fill up their cars at the petrol station? We know that events around the world are causing pressure on the supply of petroleum. People are worried about price rises at the petrol station. The Victorian government has recently released the Servo Saver app on the Service Victoria app, which allows people to compare local petrol prices. Recently I was in Bentleigh. I opened the app, had a look and found a 64-cents-a-litre difference between a petrol station on East Boundary Road and one on McKinnon Road. If you look today, you can find nearly 20-cent savings in McKinnon between two petrol stations just 1 kilometre apart. Servo Saver is free, it is simple and it is an effective way for motorists to save when they fill up at the petrol station, thanks to the Allan Labor government.

South-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Ann-Marie HERMANS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:54): (2177) My constituency question is for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety, and I ask on behalf of Sri Lankan–born parents Antony and Agal: will the minister work with VicRoads and the City of Casey to install safety barriers between Pound Road and the adjacent footpath and relocate the footpath further away from the road? On Sunday, with my friends Lyndon and Annette Samuel, I attended a large viewing for 16-year-old Chris, who was tragically struck by a vehicle that veered off Pound Road. Chris passed away. This is a major, high-traffic arterial road where there have been several incidents of cars losing control, one also striking a home's fence. With tears in his eyes, Chris's father Antony pleaded with me to plead with you to urgently act. A petition on change.org has had nearly 5500 signatures in just a week, and I am currently in the process of sponsoring a parliamentary petition on behalf of the family.

Western Metropolitan Region

David ETTERSHANK (Western Metropolitan) (12:55): (2178) My constituency question is for the Minister for Public and Active Transport. Minister, commuters and residents are reporting unsafe parking practices amid a shortage of car parks at the Watergardens station. With car parks routinely full by 7 am, many park illegally on the area of grassland between Watergardens shopping centre and the recently opened southern car park. But more car parks alone will not fix the problem. While the new Metro timetable has significantly increased the number of weekly services for Watergardens station, the lack of integrated bus networks and active transport options to get there remains. My constituent asks: what steps will the government take to address unsafe parking around Watergardens, and will it consider working with Brimbank council and Watergardens shopping centre to deliver safer active transport infrastructure and better bus connectivity?

Northern Metropolitan Region

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (12:56): (2179) My constituency question is to the Minister for Roads and Road Safety, and it concerns the dire state of Lithgow Street in Beveridge. Residents of Beveridge are deeply concerned about the condition and capacity of Lithgow Street. With only one lane in and one lane out of the entire housing estate and town, servicing thousands of residents, traffic congestion is severe, particularly during school pick-up times. Emergency vehicles are reportedly unable to exit the area safely and efficiently at peak times. A constituent has shown me correspondence from VicRoads, which points the finger at Mitchell Shire Council, and correspondence from the same council blames the work – or lack of work – being done by the state government. Finger-pointing is not good enough when it comes to these constituents. They just want to be able to get home and get to work without being stuck in traffic. Will the minister urgently investigate this gridlock and work constructively with the council to fix it?

Western Metropolitan Region

Trung LUU (Western Metropolitan) (12:57): (2180) My constituency question is for the Minister for Education. Across Victoria many campuses have now recorded their highest year 7 intake ever, especially across the western corridor. Parents in my electorate are concerned about overcrowding, the availability of local school places and the long-term planning needed to ensure children can access quality education close to home. Can the minister please update my constituents on whether the Allan Labor government has any additional infrastructure, staffing or planning measures to support the growth area experiencing a significant enrolment surge, particularly in my electorate, the Western Metropolitan Region. Alamanda K–9 College in Point Cook alone has expanded by 128 year 7 students. The community in the west want clarity on how the government is responding to such rapid enrolment growth and what steps are being taken to prevent overcrowding pressure from getting worse.

Western Victoria Region

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (12:58): (2181) My question is to the Minister for Health. Minister, new Department of Health data confirms University Hospital Geelong has recorded the third-worst emergency department wait times in Victoria for three consecutive quarters, with 90 per cent of patients waiting nearly 2½ hours to see a clinician. Geelong deserves better. Presentations have increased by more than 10 per cent in a single year to nearly 85,000, yet Barwon Health has failed to meet its ambulance transfer target for eight consecutive financial years. The government allocated Geelong just $4.4 million from its $50 million ramping package, a fraction of what this crisis demands. Minister, given this is a sustained systemic failure, not a temporary spike, when will you commit to a specific plan with clear deadlines to provide adequate funding to bring University Hospital Geelong's emergency wait times in line with the Victorian average?

Eastern Victoria Region

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (12:59): (2182) My question is to the Minister for Police. Minister, two years ago you promised the youth crime prevention and early intervention program would be delivered in the Latrobe Valley. Despite $6 million being allocated for the expansion across a number of sectors, including Latrobe Valley, my community has seen no rollout, no updates and no response, and you did not answer my correspondence from last year. Sadly, youth crime continues to rise across much of Gippsland, including the Latrobe Valley, and our local police along with families, businesses and community groups are bearing the brunt of this delay. Your government abolished all other crime prevention programs, leaving this one the only pathway to early intervention and prevention. My community should not have to wait longer. Minister, when will the youth crime prevention and early intervention program finally commence operation, and when will you be serving the Latrobe Valley in a much better capacity than you are now?

Western Victoria Region

Joe McCRACKEN (Western Victoria) (13:00): (2183) My question is to the Minister for Public and Active Transport. Central Goldfields shire has called for an extra three train services along the Maryborough line. There are currently only two services a day. Mayor Cr Ben Green has said this will help those most disadvantaged to access key services in Ballarat and Melbourne, but it is also going to help tourism, small business and the local economy. I compare this fairly minor ask in the great scheme of things to what is being spent in Melbourne – billions on the Suburban Rail Loop, billions on the West Gate Tunnel – and yet country Victoria always seems to get short-changed. So my question to the minister is this: will the minister commit to supporting the Central Goldfields shire's request for an extra three services a day, or will they continually be ignored and, by extension, will the people of Maryborough and district be ignored as well?

Northern Victoria Region

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (13:01): (2184) My question is for the Minister for Transport Infrastructure. Will the minister commit to providing more parking at Donnybrook train station? The number of parking spaces at Donnybrook train station falls far short of demand, and every morning commuters fill the residential roads and surrounding streets. In May last year I asked the government to increase car parking at Donnybrook train station, and the minister replied to say that the government were aware of the high demand for access to public transport, especially at Donnybrook train station, but they had no further planned car parking upgrades at Donnybrook station. Results of the community consultation for the Donnybrook Road upgrade were recently released and show that locals are concerned about the need for improved access to the train station. The Allan Labor government must pay attention to local voices and include plans for increased car parking at Donnybrook station as part of its plans to upgrade Donnybrook Road.

North-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Richard WELCH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (13:02): (2185) My constituency matter is for the Minister for Police. On the weekend a member of the public alerted me to the fact that there was some vandalism occurring in real time at Blackburn station. It was significant vandalism that will take a lot of money to fix and clean up. The citizen went and checked whether there was a PSO at Blackburn station to intervene or to prevent or apprehend the person performing the vandalism, and there was no-one there. The question was raised with me: where were the PSOs? Are PSOs no longer stationed at Blackburn station, and what should the community expectation be? I would ask the minister to please clarify for my community: what is the official status of PSOs at Blackburn station, and when should they be on duty? When is it expected that they be on duty?

North-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Nick McGOWAN (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (13:03): (2186) My question is for the Minister for Police in the other place. I had the misfortune recently of being in Doncaster East. I do not often venture north of the freeway, because I like to stay in my own electorate of Ringwood. Nonetheless I did venture north, and having done so, very, very unfortunately I had occasion to go across the road to the police station.

Harriet Shing interjected.

Nick McGOWAN: Sadly, I did not find my jacket there. I found no clothes. I am not going to lecture anyone on good or bad fashion. I would have reported my poor fashion sense to the police were it not for the fact they were not open. Sign after sign after sign said they were closed. It was probably a good thing for the people of Victoria they were closed and I can continue to wear what I wear. But nonetheless my simple point is this: recently I have been told that Forest Hill station too have had reduced hours, and now they will close at 6 pm every evening. It used to be 11 pm.

David Davis interjected.

Nick McGOWAN: That is shameful if true. I ask the police minister to confirm whether that is or is not true. If it is true, then I ask the minister to reverse that decision, and I seek from the Minister for Police a commitment –

Harriet Shing: The minister? Do you mean the commissioner?

Nick McGOWAN: No, from the minister himself – I will take that interjection up. I seek a commitment that he instruct that that station remain open till 11 pm every night.

Southern Metropolitan Region

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (13:04): (2187) My matter is for the attention of the Minister for Police, and it concerns a spate of violent crime in Sunhill Road, Glen Iris. I ask the

minister: will you act to ensure there are adequate police in Boroondara, where police numbers have fallen? In the case of the Ashburton police station nearby, the station has been closed by Labor – that is what they have done. They have closed the station, and they have cut the number of police. Be clear here about what is occurring, and I am indebted to Ms Banks-Smith for this information about her street. A man was seen running up – this was all in one week – Sunhill Road, and afterwards a plain-clothes police officer was seen running after him. There is a long story that follows that. On Thursday 19 February there was an attempted break-in on the north side of the street. On Thursday the 19th there was a break-in at her house at 20 Sunhill Road, Glen Iris. Four offenders entered the house at 1:30 am – frightening. Her husband woke up to the vision of four men coming down the stairs, basically next to him, where he was lying on the couch. He woke up – *(Time expired)*

Petitions

Moreland Road pedestrian and cyclist safety

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO (Northern Metropolitan) presented a petition bearing 864 signatures:

> The petition of certain citizens of the State of Victoria draws to the attention of the Legislative Council the recent tragic deaths and numerous near misses along Moreland Road, through Brunswick West, Coburg and Brunswick East. Our community deserves to walk and ride along Moreland Road safely, not fearing that they will be hit by a car as they go about their day.
>
> **The petitioners therefore request that the Legislative Council call on the Government to implement reduced speed limits, protected bike lanes, more signalised pedestrian crossings throughout the length of Moreland Road and a safe and well-lit connection across Merri Creek where Moreland Road meets Normanby Avenue.**

VicRoads, Maryborough

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) presented a petition bearing 2336 signatures:

> The petition of certain citizens of the State of Victoria draws to the attention of the Legislative Council that Central Goldfields Shire Council (**Council**) is currently reviewing the future of the Maryborough VicRoads agency service, following a change by VicRoads to its funding model. This service has operated in Maryborough as a sub-office, hosted and administered by Council for many years, providing a comprehensive suite of services including driver-licence testing and vehicle inspections. VicRoads has previously reimbursed Council for all costs associated with this service, covering staff wages, rent, utilities and cleaning. VicRoads wrote to Council in April 2025, advising that the funding model would change from 1 July 2025 to a transaction-based model. At Council's request, an interim hybrid funding model was introduced to enable a full review of the service and its sustainability. The service is due to end at the end on 31 October 2025. Council is currently undertaking this review, considering all implications for staff, businesses, residents and the community. Losing all or part of the service would have a significant adverse impact in the Central Goldfields Shire and neighbouring communities. It's not possible for a small rural council to subsidise a VicRoads service at a cost to ratepayers of hundreds of thousands of dollars per year.
>
> The petitioners therefore request that the Legislative Council call on the Government to reverse the new funding model and ensure that all services currently provided by the Maryborough VicRoads remains.

Bev McARTHUR: As this is a petition qualifying for debate under standing order 11.03(10), I give notice that I intend to move 'That the petition be taken into consideration' on Wednesday of next sitting week.

Fire services

Nick McGOWAN (North-Eastern Metropolitan) presented a petition bearing 12,994 signatures:

> The petition of certain citizens of the State of Victoria draws to the attention of the Legislative Council the catastrophic fires experienced by firefighters and the community. These fires have already resulted in loss of life and injury to people with nearly 1,000 structures, including more than 220 homes, damaged, destroyed and lost, and 1,100 farming properties damaged. In addition, over 15,000 livestock perished, over 400,000 acres burned and there has been significant detrimental impacts on agriculture and infrastructure,

including communications towers down, powerlines down and impacted drinking water, sewage treatment plants, cool-store structures and railways.

Victorian fire services should have had the funding and resources to be better prepared, but they were not provided with such. The Victorian Government has ignored calls from career and volunteer firefighters and not provided firefighters with the funding needed for replacement of fleet and equipment. 800 CFA tankers are out of date and unreliable and of those, 230 are over 31 years old. 65 per cent of the Fire Rescue Victoria fire trucks are out of date and unsafe. The new Emergency Services and Volunteer Fund raises questions about how funding has been, and is being, distributed to fire agencies.

The petitioners therefore request that the Legislative Council establish a Select Committee to inquire into, consider and report by 28 July 2026 on fire services funding and resources, including (a) CFA and Fire Rescue Victoria fire appliances; (b) the distribution of the Emergency Services and Volunteer Fund and its predecessor to fund fire agencies and expenditure on matters other than operational; (c) mandatory requirements on the Government to provide monies to fire agencies; (d) the effectiveness of, and transparency around, current budget setting processes for fire agencies, additional funding, grant request processes for fleet replacement; (e) compliance with the Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004; (f) the mental health impacts from fires; (g) the impacts on livestock, farmers, industry and insurance; (h) implementation of recommendations from the 2009 Royal Commission and other inquiries; and (i) recruitment and retention of volunteers.

Nick McGOWAN: As this is a petition qualifying for debate under standing order 11.03(10), I give notice that I intend to move 'That the petition be taken into consideration' on Wednesday of next sitting week.

Firearms regulation

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL (Northern Victoria) presented a petition bearing 25,552 signatures:

The petition of certain citizens of the State of Victoria draws to the attention of the Legislative Council that proposed changes to gun legislation has been a knee-jerk reaction to a terrorist event in New South Wales. The current gun legislation is already sufficient and was not used to prevent this tragedy due to the gunmen already being on the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation's watch list. The proposed changes will only further penalise our legally licensed firearm owners and will not in any way stop terrorist attacks in the near future.

The petitioners therefore request that the Legislative Council call on the Government to halt the proposed changes to gun legislation and push for tougher measures against non-Australian citizens who do not have the same opinion as Australian citizens and do not want to participate in the country's values and freedoms.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: As this is a petition qualifying for debate under standing order 11.03(10), I give notice that I intend to move 'That the petition be taken into consideration' on Wednesday of next sitting week.

Bills

Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission Amendment (Follow the Money) Bill 2026

Introduction and first reading

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (13:10): I introduce a bill for an act to amend the Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission Act 2011 to expand the Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission's jurisdiction and provide further for public hearings and for other purposes. I move:

That the bill be now read a first time.

Motion agreed to.

Read first time.

Evan MULHOLLAND: I move:

That the second reading be made an order of the day for the next day of meeting.

Motion agreed to.

Committees

Scrutiny of Acts and Regulations Committee

Alert Digest No. 3

Sonja TERPSTRA (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (13:10): Pursuant to section 35 of the Parliamentary Committees Act 2003, I table *Alert Digest* No. 3 of 2026, including appendices, from the Scrutiny of Acts and Regulations Committee. I move:

That the report be published.

Motion agreed to.

Environment and Planning Committee

Inquiry into Community Consultation Practices

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (13:11): Pursuant to standing order 23.22, I table the report of the inquiry into community consultation practices, including an appendix and extracts of proceedings, from the Environment and Planning Committee and present the transcripts of evidence. I move:

That the transcripts of evidence be tabled and the report be published.

Motion agreed to.

Ryan BATCHELOR: I move:

That the Council take note of the report.

The Legislative Council's Environment and Planning Committee has undertaken an inquiry into community consultation practices in Victoria by state and local governments. The committee, in making this report, received 133 submissions, held three days of public hearings and two online community round tables to determine how engagement in the state of Victoria by state and local authorities could be improved. We have made 28 recommendations and 59 findings in the report that is being tabled today.

The broad brushstrokes of the report are that the committee concluded that the Victorian government's public engagement framework is not consistently applied to all engagements conducted by departments and agencies and has made a series of recommendations about improving the application of the engagement framework by departments and by their consultants and/or contractors who engage in those processes on behalf of government. With a real focus on consistent application of the framework and its principles and also supporting a genuine partnership and dialogue between government and the community, a series of recommendations have been made.

I want to thank the community members from right across Victoria who participated in the inquiry, advocacy organisations and local government. We had engagement experts, academics and representatives from government agencies sharing their range of experiences. People obviously spend a lot of time engaging with consultation processes, and that is a really important thing to recognise and value. Consultation processes often result in improvements to proposals. Sometimes not everything that a participant in a process wants is achieved through the process, and the processes themselves have to be robust enough to take account of that.

I want to thank all the members of the Environment and Planning Committee and those who participated in its proceedings for their genuinely collaborative work on this inquiry. I also want to

thank the committee secretariat staff: manager Lilian Topic until her retirement and then Kieran Crowe and the research and inquiry officers Jessica Summers and Adeel Siddiqi, supported by administrative staff Sylvette Bassy and Monique Riordan Hill. It was a good inquiry. I think it gave the committee members a deal of insight into the range of matters that are being consulted on across Victoria on a daily, monthly and yearly basis, and I commend the report to the house.

Gaelle BROAD (Northern Victoria) (13:14): I am pleased to speak on this report conducted by the Environment and Planning Committee, of which I am a member, following the inquiry into consultation practices. I do want to echo the chair in thanking all those who made a contribution to this inquiry, because their feedback and insights certainly helped shape the findings and recommendations of this report. But I wish the deliberations of the committee were broadcast live, because it was evident from the issues raised by MPs on all sides of this chamber that many were on the same page. The current Labor government seems to be allergic to community consultation. There are requirements and there are guidelines, but the public engagement framework standards are not being met; in fact we are seeing the absolute opposite.

We had examples presented about the government enforcing non-disclosure agreements, which close down genuine consultation. We saw that with the Municipal Association of Victoria not being able to talk to their own members. Consultants are being used often as scapegoats to shield the government from accountability. The disability sector spoke. The government likes to spruik 'Nothing about us without us', but our committee heard the opposite is the case. When it comes to transmission lines and energy projects in regional areas, people feel as though they have no voice and their rights are being removed under this government. We heard about the Bendigo showgrounds redevelopment following the Commonwealth Games debacle, and certainly community consultation did not occur with that. Dale Webster, a journalist, referenced the issue and said:

> Calling a process in which you tell stakeholders what has been decided after the major works have been put out to tender a "consultation" does not make it a consultation.

Too often we heard that this government's approach is consultold rather than consulted, and the fact that the Department of Premier and Cabinet did not make a submission to this inquiry or present, when it falls within their ministerial responsibility, speaks volumes. Effective community consultation must be grounded in local knowledge that adds value to projects, not top-down directives from a desktop. This report makes for some interesting reading, and I encourage everyone to access it on the committee's website.

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (13:16): I also rise to speak to the committee report that has been tabled today, and in doing so I thank the secretariat of our committee, who put in an enormous amount of work to support the committee in their work. But mostly I thank those Victorians who took the time to contribute submissions or to participate in some of the round tables. Mr Batchelor said that the committee report found that the consultation practices were not consistently applied across departments. And that is true – that is what it found. But what we actually heard were voices that were highly critical of the Victorian government's engagement strategy and their willingness to listen. I hope that out of this the government will listen more carefully to those Victorians. As Mrs Broad said, the use of non-disclosure agreements was highly criticised by members of the community, and members of the community were also highly critical of consultation often being about information rather than genuine consultation where they had the ability to contribute before decisions were made. Far too often the consultation is coming after the final decisions have been made. Particularly we heard from people in regional Victoria around solar, wind and transmission lines, and they were highly critical of the lack of consultation with their communities and the lack of opportunity to have input into any decision-making. They felt that their voices were not heard at all by the Victorian government. As I said, I hope the Victorian government takes our recommendations on board and that future consultation is genuine consultation, not just information giving.

Motion agreed to.

Papers

Papers

Tabled by Clerk:

Education and Care Services National Law Act 2010 – Education and Care Services National Further Amendment Regulations 2025, under section 303 of the Act.

Interpretation of Legislation Act 1984 – Notice under section 32(3)(a)(iii) in relation to Statutory Rule No. 145/2025 *(Gazette G8, 19 February 2026)*.

Planning and Environment Act 1987 – Notices of approval of the –

Alpine, Alpine Resorts, Ararat, Ballarat, Banyule, Bass Coast, Baw Baw, Bayside, Benalla, Boroondara, Brimbank, Buloke, Campaspe, Cardinia, Casey, Central Goldfields, Colac Otway, Corangamite, East Gippsland, Frankston, French Island and Sandstone Island, Gannawarra, Glen Eira, Glenelg, Golden Plains, Greater Bendigo, Greater Dandenong, Greater Geelong, Hepburn, Hindmarsh, Hobsons Bay, Horsham, Hume, Indigo, Kingston, Knox, Latrobe, Loddon, Macedon Ranges, Manningham, Mansfield, Maribyrnong, Maroondah, Melbourne, Melton, Merri-bek, Mildura, Mitchell, Moira, Monash, Moonee Valley, Moorabool, Mornington Peninsula, Mount Alexander, Moyne, Murrindindi, Nillumbik, Northern Grampians, Port of Melbourne, Queenscliffe, South Gippsland, Southern Grampians, Stonnington, Strathbogie, Surf Coast, Swan Hill, Towong, Wangaratta, Warrnambool, Wellington, West Wimmera, Whitehorse, Whittlesea, Wodonga, Wyndham, Yarra, Yarra Ranges and Yarriambiack Planning Schemes – Amendment GC269.

Frankston Planning Scheme – Amendment C148.

Moonee Valley Planning Scheme – Amendment C240.

Yarra Planning Scheme – Amendment C333.

Statutory Rules under the following Acts of Parliament –

Conservation, Forest and Lands Act 1987 – No. 13.

Planning and Environment Act 1987 – No. 9.

Road Safety Act 1986 – Nos. 11 and 12.

Transport (Compliance and Miscellaneous) Act 1983 – No. 10.

Unclaimed Money Act 2008 – No. 8.

Subordinate Legislation Act 1994 –

Documents under section 15 in relation to Statutory Rule Nos. 5, 7, 8, 9 and 11.

Legislative instrument and related documents under section 16B in respect of the Electricity Distribution Code of Practice Amendment 2026 under the Essential Services Commission Act 2001.

Petitions

Responses

The Clerk: I have received the following paper for presentation pursuant to standing orders: Attorney-General's response to the petition titled 'Legalise the purchase and use of pepper spray'.

Papers

Department of the Legislative Council

Overdue government responses to standing committee reports

The Clerk: I have received the President's report on overdue government responses to standing committee reports as at 28 February 2026.

Production of documents

Country Fire Authority

The Clerk: I table a letter from the Attorney-General dated 18 February 2026 in response to a resolution of the Council on 4 February 2026 on the motion of Mrs McArthur relating to the CFA

board statement. The letter states that the date for production of documents does not allow sufficient time to respond and that the government will endeavour to provide a final response to the order as soon as possible.

Energy policy

The Clerk: I table a further letter from the Attorney-General dated 18 February 2026, in response to a resolution of the Council on 4 February 2026 on the motion of Mr Davis relating to the withdrawal of compressed natural gas. The letter states that the date for production of documents does not allow sufficient time to respond and that the government will endeavour to provide a final response to the order as soon as possible.

Business of the house

Notices

Notices of motion given.

General business

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (13:36): I move, by leave:

That the following general business take precedence on Wednesday 4 March 2026:

(1) order of the day made this day, second reading of the Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission Amendment (Follow the Money) Bill 2026;

(2) notice of motion given this day by me on small businesses;

(3) order of the day 6, resumption of debate on the second reading of the Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission Amendment (Ending Political Corruption) Bill 2024;

(4) notice of motion given this day by Sarah Mansfield on implementing the recommendations of the Integrity and Oversight Committee's inquiry into the operation of the Freedom of Information Act 1982; and

(5) notice of motion given this day by David Davis referring matters relating to the funding of integrity agencies to the Integrity and Oversight Committee.

Motion agreed to.

Committees

Legal and Social Issues Committee

Membership

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (13:37): I move, by leave:

That I be a participating member of the Legal and Social Issues Standing Committee.

Motion agreed to.

Members statements

Middle East conflict

Sonja TERPSTRA (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (13:37): I rise today to express my solidarity with the people of Iran, who have been protesting in the streets in response to deep economic hardship in their country and of course appalling human rights abuses being carried out by the Iranian regime. I share the sentiments expressed by the Prime Minister recently, and I deeply admire the extraordinary courage of the Iranian people, who continue to stand up for their basic human rights in the face of violence and oppression. The atrocities being committed against those who are demanding democracy, dignity and freedom are shocking, distressing and unacceptable. The North-Eastern Metropolitan Region is home to the largest Iranian community not only in Victoria but also in Australia, and I am proud that they have made it their home. However, many Iranian families are living with fear and uncertainty. Their loved ones who are still in Iran may have been detained, silenced and harmed. The

emotional toll on our Iranian community is immense, and I extend my heartfelt sympathy and support to them in their time of need. I have had the privilege of meeting many Iranian families in my region who have come to Australia seeking safety while maintaining strong connections to their beautiful culture and heritage. They are a valued part of our community, and we must continue to stand with them and call out the actions of the authoritarian Iranian regime and ensure that Iranian Victorians feel supported, heard and safe. The courage of Iranian people both here and abroad demands our respect and our solidarity, and I stand with them today and always.

Construction industry

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (13:39): Corruption costs, and what we have seen in this state is widespread corruption in the Big Build that is costing Victorian taxpayers every single day, not just today, not just tomorrow but in the future to come. $15 billion of taxpayers money has lined the pockets of bikies and criminals, and it is just appalling that the Premier has tried to say to Victorians that she did the right thing by referring the allegations to IBAC when we know that IBAC came back to her and said, 'We don't have the powers to investigate'; the Minister for Police has discredited Geoffrey Watson, who has got a very strong history of integrity in corruption, working with territory MPs, state MPs and federal MPs; and the Attorney-General also misled the Parliament around what she actually did, referring issues when the police said they never got any referrals. A Liberals and Nationals government will clean this mess up once and for all, and that is why we will be unveiling our sweeping anti-corruption plan, which will give IBAC follow-the-money powers. It will establish Construction Enforcement Victoria. It will stamp out organised crime on government-funded construction projects. We will introduce tough new laws modelled on the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act – RICO – in the United States. This will target criminal bosses who run organised crime networks. For far too long criminals have got away with this behaviour under the Allan government.

Housing

Katherine COPSEY (Southern Metropolitan) (13:40): I rise today to speak about the urgent need to protect and expand public housing in Victoria. Our state is in the grip of a housing crisis, with around 120,000 Victorians on the public housing waitlist and around 30,000 people experiencing homelessness on any given night. Yet instead of treating public housing as essential infrastructure, Labor keep making decisions that put public homes at risk, including their current scheme, which hands off public land and public assets to private developers. At a recent community forum held in my region residents and advocates spoke powerfully about what public housing means to them: stability, safety and dignity. One elderly resident told us, 'I was told I was able to retire here.' That statement should shame this government. People have built their lives around their public homes and their communities around their public homes and the promise of secure public housing, not short-term redevelopment deals and uncertainty. The Greens are standing with campaigns like 44 Flats United and with public housing tenants across the state. We are calling on the government to stop undermining public housing and instead build more public homes, refurbish their existing stock and guarantee tenants' rights and security, because housing is a human right and public housing must be protected.

South West TAFE

Jacinta ERMACORA (Western Victoria) (13:42): My members statement is about how much it was a pleasure to join Minister Tierney as she turned the sod for the new Building Innovation and Design Centre at South West TAFE's Sherwood Park campus in Warrnambool. This was last week, and it highlights the Labor government's total commitment to regional education and workforce development. As CEO of South West TAFE Mark Fidge said, this project delivers industry-leading facilities that will equip our region with the skilled tradespeople essential for future growth. The centre will prepare students for careers in the automotive, construction and clean energy industries. It will feature automotive workshops and a dedicated electric vehicle training workshop. This is so exciting for our local tradies, readying them for the emerging technologies and the clean energy transition. Five

million dollars from the TAFE Clean Energy Fund was contributed to this build, and it forms part of a very strong facilitative project for the Warrnambool technical college in town at the TAFE campus. We are protecting free TAFE and investing in modern facilities.

JMB Modular Buildings

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (13:43): Last week I had the pleasure of visiting a small business that hopes to make big waves in the home building industry. I spent a full morning at JMB Modular Buildings, a local Shepparton business owned by Jamie and Rachel Briggs, where I was able to observe them manufacturing modular homes to be used as social housing in Beechworth. JMB build modular homes that can bring down the price and time of building a new home and are creating long-term skilled jobs in advanced manufacturing in northern Victoria. Through their impressive advanced manufacturing methods JMB are able to deliver a completed home, ready for transport in just 40 days. Following transportation, all that is required is for the home to be connected to utilities and services, and it is ready to be lived in. The factory and equipment as they stand have required an investment of $9 million, but there are still further stages to be added to allow JMB to manufacture homes at full capacity. JMB have applied for regional development funding and also written to the Premier, the Treasurer and the Minister for Housing and Building to help them complete their facility but have not yet had a response. Victoria is desperate for housing, and JMB can deliver quality homes in a fraction of the time others take to build them. If the government are serious about relieving the pressure on housing supply and affordability, they should be looking to innovative builders like JMB. JMB can supply high-quality, ready-to-occupy modular homes for first home buyers, key workers and social and general housing. The modules can also be joined together to deliver larger homes.

Syrian repatriations

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL (Northern Victoria) (13:45): Last week the media was saturated with reports about the possible return of so-called ISIS brides to Australia. Communities right across this state were rightly asking: where will they go, what safeguards are in place and has Victoria been consulted? Then we heard that the majority of these women and their children reportedly want to come to Victoria. What was the response from the Premier? She claimed she knew nothing about it – nothing. Then on 25 February the *Herald Sun* reported she had known about this for five months. At a time when Victorians deserve transparency, honesty and leadership on matters of national security we instead saw deflection and denial. This is not a minor administrative issue; this concerns public safety, community confidence and the integrity of our border and security processes. Victorians have every right to expect their Premier to be informed, engaged and up-front. Once again the Premier has failed that test. Victorians deserve better than spin; they deserve the truth.

Construction industry

Richard WELCH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (13:46): The community is rightly outraged by the fleecing of $15 billion from communities under their nose for no return to us but a return to organised crime, criminals and those who intimidate, peddle drugs, harass women and degrade our society. The government has shown absolutely no genuine intent to get to the bottom of this. In fact it has done every semantic and evasive measure it could do to delay, to distract and to water down any proper investigation into these matters. It is clear the government has no intent. It is as clear as day, because when the Premier paraded a letter saying that it had referred matters to IBAC, trying to invoke the authority of IBAC in that measure, we found that IBAC had already clearly indicated they could not review it. The insincerity is appalling. The Liberals have been very clear about what we will do. We will clean it up. We will target crime bosses. We will create a taskforce to recover the money stolen from us, deliver more powers to IBAC, establish Construction Enforcement Victoria, stamp out organised crime on government projects and establish, most importantly, a royal commission into CFMEU practices. It is the very least our state deserves.

Arts funding

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (13:48): The community should be aware that this government has delivered some stunning and very vicious cuts to the arts sector, and it has done that without proper process through a series of phone calls in the last few days before Christmas to key agencies that have had funding over a longer period and that make a very significant contribution to our community: the Abbotsford Convent had $200,000 a year cut to zero; Writers Victoria, an organisation funded under all governments since 1989, funding of $150,000 a year, cut to zero; the Public Galleries Association of Victoria is a similar story, funding cut to zero. Key organisations that have contributed massively, like Musica Viva, providing a schools program in Victoria – a very modest program at a modest cost – have been cut to zero. All of these organisations have been targeted by this government without proper process in a nasty set of cuts delivered by the minister through his Creative Victoria group. I have to say that group does not have proper processes, it does not make proper decisions and these are very damaging cuts to the arts. Six regional art galleries have been told, 'You will only be funded for two years, and after that you're on your own.' These are nasty cuts, they are vicious cuts and Jacinta Allan has got to be held responsible for these cuts to arts organisations.

Antipodes Festival

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (13:49): It was great to attend both days of the Antipodes Greek festival in Melbourne. I joined Mr Davis, Rachel Westaway, Moira Deeming, Chris Crewther, Bev McArthur and of course the opposition leader Jess Wilson at the Antipodes Greek festival with thousands of members of the Greek community in Victoria. And I have to say, Jess Wilson received an incredibly warm reception from the large diaspora community right in the heart of Melbourne on Lonsdale Street. Not one boo was heard. Greek Australians have contributed so much to Australia through culture, small business, cuisine and community.

Middle East conflict

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (13:50): On the weekend I had the honour of addressing thousands at a large and impromptu rally on the steps of Parliament held by the Iranian Australian community as they celebrated what was hopefully an enormous step in a transition to a free and democratic Iran. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps has carried out terrorism attacks in Victoria, denies education rights for women and murders protesters, so I condemn publicly all memorial services offered for the late Ayatollah Ali Khamenei at select mosques around this state. It is sickening, it is disgusting and it should be condemned by all sides of politics. Iran's beating heart has never stopped. The weight of tyranny is lifting. To those fighting for change: we see you, we hear you, and Australia and Victoria stand with you.

Business of the house

Notices of motion

Lee TARLAMIS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (13:51): I move:

> That the consideration of notices of motion, government business, 278 to 1287, be postponed until later this day.

Motion agreed to.

Bills

Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Supporting Stable and Strong Families) Bill 2025

Second reading

Debate resumed on motion of Gayle Tierney:

> That the bill be now read a second time.

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (13:51): I rise to speak to the Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Supporting Stable and Strong Families) Bill 2025. I note today that we have got two bills in relation to child protection. The bill that we will be debating after this one is the Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Stability) Bill 2025. So it is a bit curious that we are not doing a cognate debate here, given the issues that largely are impacting both of these bills. I want to go to what the government is achieving by moving the first bill, the one that I have just mentioned, the supporting stable and strong families bill, before we go on to the next one. But many of the issues and the concerns that I have with this bill are the same issues that I will be repeating myself about in a couple of hours time, I suspect. What the government is trying to do here is set up a scheme to promote a whole-of-government approach to supporting vulnerable children in the child protection system, their families and care leavers. It is based on a principle that when the state takes responsibility for a child, responsibility for that child's wellbeing extends beyond child protection and into other parts of government.

I want to just step back in time, because this government has been in power for 10 years, and yet this system has declined. The child protection system has declined, and the appalling situations that we hear about and read about on far too many occurrences have been under their watch. But I want to step back to when the former minister Mary Wooldridge and former Premier Ted Baillieu instigated the Protecting Victoria's Vulnerable Children Inquiry, or the Cummins report, as it became known, a very significant body of work that was undertaken during our government. In that, the terms of reference included looking at issues around:

- Strategies to enhance early identification of, and intervention targeted at, children and families at risk including the role of adult, universal and primary services …
- The quality, structure, role and functioning of:
  - family services;
  - statutory child protection …
  - out-of-home care …
- The interaction of departments and agencies, the courts and service providers and how they can better work together to support at-risk families and children.

That note I particularly want to come back to, because it is really what the government has failed to implement – a lot of these recommendations that were in the Cummins inquiry. Other terms of reference include:

- The appropriate roles and responsibilities of government and non-government organisations in relation to Victoria's child protection policy and systems.
- Possible changes to the processes of the courts referencing the recent work of and options put forward by the Victorian Law Reform Commission.
- Measures to enhance the government's ability to:
  - plan for future demand for family services, statutory child protection services and out-of-home care; and
  - ensure a workforce that delivers services of a high quality to children and families.

And importantly:

> The oversight and transparency of the child protection, care and support system and whether changes are necessary in oversight, transparency, and/or regulation to achieve an increase in public confidence and improved outcomes for children.

That body of work, as I said, is a very important body of work. I do not even know if the minister has read it. I doubt she has – whether she has done anything. It really went to the heart of what was happening, because what we knew when we came into government was that the child protection system was in an appalling state, and it was one of the first things that the government did, understanding the vulnerability and the very issue around these children who are in the child protection system and who are at risk. Going back and having a look at what the inquiry report handed down and

did say and what they found, they talked about a policy framework for a system to protect vulnerable children and young people. In chapter 6, the introduction says:

> One of the major problems in Victoria is our continuously 'siloed service systems' …

This chapter goes on to talk about what was needed:

> ***A systems approach to protecting … children and young people***

The inquiry itself defined the goal of focusing on a child's needs as a basis for evaluation. It goes on to say, importantly:

> A system focus assesses the collective impact of individual elements affecting a child's environment and examines whether the system as a whole is effective at meeting the needs of a child when their parents or caregivers are unable to.

We know that it is very challenging work. Child protection workers, those with carer responsibilities and foster carers do extraordinary work, and this inquiry acknowledged the work of those people. They understood that it was very challenging work and that the child's needs and the support that those workers needed were critical to get the best outcomes for children. It talks about defining a child's needs. Chapter 6 says:

> A child's needs go further than ensuring a child's safety from harm.

This is another important aspect, given what is occurring in this state and the appalling situation that we see.

> A child's essential needs encompass overall health, physical and emotional development and life skills.

Importantly:

> **Safety needs:** a child should be safe from harm or an unacceptable risk of harm (including an understanding of the impact of cumulative patterns of harm), plus a child needs protection from harmful influences, abuse and exploitation …

For 10 years the exploitation, the harm and the appalling situation that has arisen have been recorded. The government has not been up-front with the public around the appalling situation, but others have spoken out, and there is media article after media article about those failings. I just want to run through a few.

Berry Street residential care staff reported concerns about second-hand exposure to drugs at work, fearing that they may themselves be drug affected due to children openly using ice inside care homes. Workers were instructed to take safety precautions such as wearing face masks if in close proximity to young people using ice. Former staff say drug use is common and staff are powerless to intervene. This highlights the wider systemic issues in residential care, including that those workers – those very people that are doing their best to look after these vulnerable children – are left feeling undertrained, unsupported and burnt out. There are examples of what those workers say. I read an article where one woman at Berry Street in Ballarat, who was brought up in a residential home, went back and looked after those children. She is quoted extensively, and it is just heartbreaking to read her story.

Another article states that the state has a duty of care to these vulnerable children, and it is failing in many respects. In a report by the ABC, a mother said her daughters became more unsafe after entering residential care, engaging in smoking, drinking and drug use. A 13-year-old girl was leaving care at night to meet adult men, leading to multiple sexual assaults and rapes, and she became pregnant – at the age of 13.

But the residential care workers, the very workers that are there to support these children, have no legal power to stop them from leaving residential care, making them vulnerable to trafficking and

exploitation – the very issue that the Cummins inquiry highlighted in 2011 around what they needed to do:

> **Safety needs:** a child should be safe from harm or unacceptable risk of harm (including an understanding of the impact of cumulative patterns of harm), plus a child needs protection from harmful influences, abuse and exploitation …

These children under this government have been continuously exploited, and they are doing this: drug trafficking, being sexually exploited, being raped – and worse.

Only last year in a report tabled in Parliament former commissioner for children and young people Liana Buchanan says the investigation into the case of a 12-year-old girl with significant mental health issues who stabbed a woman to death 'exposed some of the most profound service system failures I have seen'. That is what the commissioner for children and young people said – 'the most profound service system failures I have seen'. She went on to say the case was:

> … a tragic example of how Victoria's most vulnerable children can be fouled by the systems designed to protect and support them.

There are many, many other stories. There are many other areas. Former commissioner Bernie Geary also spoke about how the system has failed, and under our government he instigated his own report and went into that. So these issues that the government is now fixing have not been new – they have been in the system – but what has happened under this government over the last decade has been how extensive and how much worse it has been getting. I note that Pat McGorry has also spoken about how the system has failed these vulnerable children and what is happening to them inside the system. There are just too many media articles to quote from around the number of children that are put at harm and the number of children that are dying in state care.

I have asked the minister multiple times in this house what is happening around – not individual cases, just on the numbers – those children who are in residential care and who have been caught up in crime gangs and other areas and putting themselves and others at risk, and she continuously refuses to answer, blaming us for bringing these issues up where we are not the only ones. When you have got former care workers and others who are experts in the field saying that this is the worst they have ever seen, that is on the government's head. This is under the government's watch, so they have a responsibility to be accountable here. Now what they have done is they have brought in a bill that tries to patch all of this up.

I want to go back to the Cummins inquiry, because the conclusions of that extensive report speak about child abuse and neglect having a devastating impact on the lives of children and what we can do. It acknowledges the work of those that work in the system, how they are doing their very best and that they need support, and that there needs to be more focus on meeting the needs of children and young people in Victoria's system for protecting children. It is talking about all of these agencies, including not only the agencies that are dealing with them, but also the courts and the police. In its final recommendation it talks about the major system reforms, and the second point on the major system reforms is:

> Clearer departmental and agency accountability for addressing the needs of vulnerable children, in particular, health and education.

When you go back, I have explained about those children who are using ice, trafficking drugs, being used themselves for sexual exploitation and falling pregnant at the age of 13. These are the most horrific issues. They have been caught up in crime gangs. They are committing horrendous crimes themselves. We have got to stop that trajectory. The numbers are just getting greater and greater, and the health and education needs of these children are imperative. We do not even know if they go to school. I have asked that question in here, and no-one will answer that very basic question.

The conclusion of the Cummins report also speaks about reducing the system goals, reducing the incidence of child abuse and neglect and reducing the impact of child abuse and neglect, including

addressing the immediate and long-term needs of the child – safety, health, development, education and to be heard. It makes the point that the children need to be listened to and to be heard, and I think we have understood that from a number of inquiries around abuse of children. Certainly I had that experience when I did the Betrayal of Trust inquiry, which was a recommendation of this very report; the inquiry that we did that led to the *Betrayal of Trust* report was a recommendation of the Cummins inquiry. The other system goals include:

> Over time, reducing the growth in the number of children and young people in out-of-home care in line with the overall growth in the population of Victoria's children and young people; and
>
> Clear and transparent public accountability.

This government has failed on all of those. As I said, I do not know what they did with that Cummins inquiry, but I doubt whether any of them even read it, because the system failures have been so significant. This is what we had back then – the number of reports in 2010–11 was 55,000. They have skyrocketed. In 2020–21 there were around 121,000 child protection reports. That was five years ago. Five years ago they were at 121,000; 10 years ago they were at 55,000. So those report numbers are getting bigger, and the system itself is ballooning with the number of children coming into the system. In 2020–21 there were about 9500 children and young people within the child protection system, and as we speak there are around 11,000, or more than 11,000.

You have seen this exponential growth in children in child protection and care under this government and the most appalling failures, as I have highlighted. I do not need to go through those again. I make those points because what this bill is doing is trying to cover up the government's failures, quite frankly. They are looking at establishing a supporting stable and strong families scheme that designates ministers, department heads and the Chief Commissioner of Police as partners of this scheme. It goes on to talk about the definition of these partners and who they will be. It requires these partners to prepare plans every two years outlining intended actions within their respective portfolios. It requires these reports to be tabled in Parliament at the end of each two-year plan period. But it does not really talk about how to be accountable. It is talking about a plan to make a plan. The partners are required to prepare plans on how their portfolios, as I said, will contribute to improved coordination and support, but how are we getting better outcomes for these children? How are these plans actually going to do that? And how are they going to be coordinated across these government agencies and departments?

There are a lot of other areas within this bill. There is the expanded advisory role of the Children's Services Coordination Board. That currently is comprised of departmental secretaries and the Chief Commissioner of Police. This is what the board will do: it will provide guidance on the preparation of these plans that I have spoken about; it will advise on outcomes, measures and cross-government priorities; and it will consider, where known, the views of children, young people and others with lived experience. Again I go back to the Cummins inquiry. Why is the government recreating the wheel here? In the conclusion, chapter 23, it talks about these very issues across these very areas – health, education. It understands children need to be heard, that lived experience. You can see that through these media reports of some of these carers that have just walked away because they are literally just devastated; they just cannot deal with it any longer.

The concerning thing is the number of children that have died in Victoria's child protection system. As of last December it was reported that 37 young people died in the protection system in the last year, including 10 infants, and that is after authorities failed to follow government-mandated safety guidelines. We know the problems. Why aren't you just fixing them? These have been highlighted by the commissioners for children and young people themselves. They have spoken about the failures. They have spoken about what is going on. They have been very up-front around what has been going on. Of the 37 young people who did die last year, 22 of them had open child protection cases at the time, so we know that there are pressures and stresses and these children are very vulnerable. The number of suicides in care too are at the highest levels – another tragedy. It is very difficult for those carers who are looking after these children and dealing with some of these complex cases.

I am stunned that, given what we know, what we have known and what we have raised in this house for years about the failures in the system, they are finally being addressed by a bill that is essentially establishing a plan for a plan. That is what this is doing. There are so many good recommendations from the Cummins inquiry that should have been acted upon. That work had been done. It could have been developed and worked upon, but no, the government just ignored it. They ignored everything until finally those commissioners for children and young people were really belling the cat, and they were highlighting the very real and significant concerns that they had around the profound failures within the systems, as they have said.

Children are taking drugs or being sexually exploited, and I understand the difficulty around telephones and kids accessing that and being groomed on that. I know that is a very, very difficult area for government to deal with. For any parent, it is incredibly difficult looking at that, and I congratulate the federal government for what they are doing in trying to address some of these areas with the social media ban for young people. But what is happening here when paedophiles and sexual trafficking and sexual exploitation has just been extraordinary. The numbers are just horrifying with what is happening not only in Victoria but right around the country. It also goes to the number of children that are missing each year that are having to be tracked by police. Six hundred children under state care went missing last year. That is 50 a month. That is nearly two a day. These are not insignificant numbers. And what is happening to those children? They are not going to school. They are not getting the education, not getting the health outcomes and not getting the support that they need. Probably too many of them will end up in these gangs, doing these horrific crimes and then ending up in the justice system. None of us want that. We want early intervention. We want the prevention measures in. It is critical those children get the support and the education that they need.

This government has failed. They have failed dismally on it. I find these numbers and that this has been going on just astounding, and I want to congratulate those that have spoken out about it, who have said enough is enough. As Professor Pat McGorry says – and he acknowledges and we all acknowledge that kids with addictions are a very significant issue – support workers need support and more resourcing. He says that there needs to be a fundamental rethink on how the state is managing these kids with addictions – because how is it all right that careworkers are exposed to kids taking ice, and then they are so worried that they are going to be impacted that they cannot drive home in case they get pulled up by the police and test positive? How is that all right? It is happening here in Victoria. They have to get somebody to pick them up because the kids are all smoking ice bongs, the residential care houses are full of illegal drugs and no-one is doing anything about it. Surely to goodness these kids need a chance. They need to understand and they need to be rehabilitated, and the carers and support workers also need to be able to assist in saying, 'That is not all right. You are on a trajectory of doom and gloom if you continue taking ice.' No-one seems to care; they turn a blind eye to it all.

Here we are with a bill that goes to looking at this, to get plans in place that are going to be reviewed every two years so that everybody that is responsible, all these partners, need to put a plan in. But how will they be coordinated? How is that individual child going to benefit from going around in circles? They need better outcomes than just talk; they need real action to ensure that they are safe. Those areas that I spoke about earlier on I say again are the very areas that were highlighted as the goals:

- Reducing the impact of child abuse and neglect including addressing the immediate and long-term needs of the child:
  - safety;
  - health;
  - development;
  - education; and
  - to be heard.

Whether they are with their family under supervision or whether they are in the state system, these areas are highlighting what needs to be done. The reforms were highlighted here; there are 10 that are listed as major system reforms. The last ones were:

> A strengthened regulatory and oversight framework;
>
> A plan for practical self-determination for guardianship of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care and culturally competent service delivery; and
>
> A sector-wide approach to professional education and training and a greater development and application of knowledge to inform policy and service delivery.

It was Mary Wooldridge who appointed the commissioner for Aboriginal children and young people. That was out of this report, and I want to commend Mary Wooldridge again. It is all here; it has all been said before. But this government took no notice of it and has done nothing. The appalling situation of children in care, as I have said, has been a disgrace.

> An area-based approach to co-located intake … with clear accountability for decision making on statutory intervention;
>
> Strengthening the law and its institutions;
>
> Out-of-home care funding and services aligned to a child's needs;

The number one system reform is:

> A Vulnerable Children and Families Strategy – a whole-of-government vulnerability policy framework with the objective of focussing on a child's needs …

If that had been done over the last 10 years rather than coming to this house and doing this bill and the next bill, maybe we would not have these figures of 11,000 kids in out-of-home care; 600 kids going missing when they are under residential care, under the care of the state; the numbers of children that have died; the numbers of children that are exposed to and have no boundaries around drug use or sexual exploitation; and the appalling systems that are just not there to support the workers that are working in this system to help these young people have a chance. I make those comments because, whilst we are not opposing this bill, for obvious reasons – anything to strengthen it and improve it is better – it should have been done 10 years ago. It was there; it was laid out. It is all here in the Cummins inquiry. That is just the conclusion. Go and read the full report. It might help you, Minister. I do not envy the task of this; it is a very difficult task. But it is laid out: you have done nothing, and the results speak for themselves. Your government has failed these vulnerable children.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO (Northern Metropolitan) (14:20): I rise today to speak to the Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Supporting Stable and Strong Families) Bill 2025. The Greens support measures and safeguards that improve outcomes, safety and wellbeing for all children in out-of-home care, care leavers and their families, and that includes the rights of a child being respected and nurtured under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Through the creation of the supporting stable and strong families scheme this bill creates a legislative framework where government ministers, the Chief Commissioner of Police and heads of government departments are jointly responsible for supporting the needs of children who have come into contact with the child protection system, care leavers and their families. The supporting stable and strong families scheme is a model that the Labor government has adopted from the corporate parenting model in Scotland. The idea is that the differing government departments work together to promote wraparound support for children in care and post care, with the intention of better coordination, planning, collaboration and cohesion in delivery of care and services. Essentially, ministers of these government departments and the SSSF partners answer the essential question: if this was my child, would I be satisfied with this care and support that they are receiving?

The reality is so many children in out-of-home care and care leavers are regarded as vulnerable groups. They are one of our most disadvantaged groups. Their odds are staggering. They have higher risks of poorer outcomes in education disruption, unemployment, housing instability and engagement in the

justice system, and they are also often exposed to trauma and abuse before entering out-of-home care and within the out-of-home care system. Throughout their lives they face stigma because of their involvement with the child protection system. While many care leavers do go on to achieve great outcomes, those statistics are very low. Many also struggle without the proper safety nets.

I would like to speak more about the corporate parenting model imported from Scotland. While this model has received some positive reception by certain members of the sector, it does come with weaknesses. This model has received criticism due to its underdeveloped and tokenistic standards, leaving children in care feeling stigmatised, ignored by professionals and failed by the systems meant to protect them. According to the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, an inquiry in the UK into the corporate parenting principles revealed it is too broad and lacks enforceable standards, and the corporate parenting principles lack specificity and being action focused.

As currently drafted, the bill lacks the sufficient accountability mechanisms, as highlighted in this UK inquiry, to really achieve its intended outcomes. Without stronger safeguards there is a real risk that responsibility for poor outcomes in the child protection system could be shifted away from the Minister for Children rather than addressed transparently and effectively. The Greens are not convinced that the model in its current form will avoid the same problems seen and raised in Scotland and the UK. In Victoria we already have many frameworks in place to respond to child protection. However, their practical implications still remain unseen. The Greens have concerns that the role of the scheme is subordinate to ministerial primary powers, which leaves the scheme unenforceable.

A prime example of this is the *Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework 2018–2023*. Its purpose was to set up a whole-of-government commitment to self-determination and to significant structural and systemic transformation. It was a framework that, in the government's words, was meant to:

> … set a clear direction for how government will '**Plan**', '**Act**', '**Measure**' and '**Evaluate**' to progress change across government, address inequity and deliver stronger outcomes for and with Aboriginal Victorians.

However, there was no significant change to increase funding to support this model and action all of these goals. There is a genuine risk that this framework, like many others introduced by this Labor government in the past, will fail to deliver and that the blame for child protection failures may be shifted across ministers or, worse, onto families.

We know from the Yoorrook Justice Commission how systemic and prolific racism is within Victoria's child protection system. The Deputy Premier himself admitted in a speech:

> Historic and ongoing biases and structural and everyday racisms create barriers to the best interests of the Aboriginal child and are to be recognised and overcome.

If this government is serious about overcoming these historical traumatic experiences, then it really needs to look in the mirror to ensure that these reforms do not become just a box-ticking exercise where they are seen to be doing the right thing and actually ensure the system of care is genuinely a safer space for vulnerable children, including Aboriginal children and families.

We know from various reports that Victoria's child protection system needs a coordinated whole-of-government approach for the very obvious reason that this is what is needed to achieve the best outcomes for children and their families. The system as it stands continues to struggle with high case loads, workforce strain, limited access to early intervention programs, placement instability and inconsistent decision-making. Of greatest concern is the growing and disproportionate rate of removal of Aboriginal children and young people from their families, a pattern which repeats the harm of the stolen generations and continues a painful colonial legacy that this state has a responsibility to confront and end. Every part of the government should be making every effort to reduce the removal of children from their families, firstly by supporting families to keep their children safe in their care. When out-of-home care is the only option, time in care should be kept to the absolute minimum necessary. We know that the state is a bad parent, given the history, and that children and young people in

out-of-home care continue to suffer from worse outcomes in education, mental and physical health and employment and increased likelihood of involvement in the justice system.

All children have a right to safety, stable and affordable housing, education equity, quality health care and, ultimately, stability and support. Governments have a duty to uphold these rights, and that means that responses must be collaborative rather than working in silos. Child protection has carried most of the responsibility for intervening, resourcing and repairing harm, but the sector, as I mentioned earlier, is so overstretched that it cannot meet all of these demands while also providing stable, caring and meaningful support for children in care and post care. We need improvements in early intervention and adequate resourcing of child protective services. We need a stronger focus on prevention and care, rather than just crisis responses that do not yield sustainable and enduring outcomes for children and young people in care.

We support the principle of a genuine whole-of-government approach, stronger accountability and a sharper focus on stability for children who come into contact with government services, but our support comes with a clear expectation that this framework must be backed by real responsibility, real resourcing and real transparency. We have also heard from stakeholders that consultation has been inadequate during this process, an ongoing problem. Time and time again there has been a lack of good-faith consultation and meaningful engagement, in particular with Aboriginal stakeholders. The Greens remain equally concerned that the current drafting does not mandate a duty to consult with Aboriginal people through the First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria, nor are SSSF partners required to engage with the Aboriginal children's commissioner in the development of their SSSF plans. Victoria has the highest rate of First Nations children in out-of-home care, almost twice the national average. Reducing this over-representation must be central to any child protection reform, not treated as an afterthought.

The government has a duty, bound by the newly passed Statewide Treaty Act 2025, to embed Aboriginal self-determination into every aspect of child protection reform. This Labor government should be working towards the benchmarks set out in treaty, and it is shameful that they have not taken up this responsibility in this legislation meaningfully. We know the solutions to some of these issues in the child protection system already exist, and the Greens will continue to advocate for the implementation of all Yoorrook recommendations, as well as those recommendations put forward previously in various reports by the Commission for Children and Young People – for example, the establishment of a dedicated child protection system for First Peoples children and young people; enshrining prevention and early intervention as a guiding principle in the Children, Youth and Families Act 2005; increasing investment in Aboriginal community controlled organisations; and keeping First Nations children and young people connected to culture when they are placed in out-of-home care.

To strengthen and address some of the gaps I spoke about earlier in my speech we have a few amendments, which I request for the clerks to circulate now. These amendments come from Aboriginal-controlled legal services and community legal sector peak bodies. They seek to honour the era of treaty being signed a few months ago and to better support Aboriginal children and families, who sadly make up many of those in contact with the child protection system.

The first amendment makes changes to new section 20I(d) to strengthen requirements on the SSSF scheme partners to comply with the recognition principles and the rights of Aboriginal children and families. This amendment is around strengthening the language in the bill beyond a passive acknowledgement. It requires SSSF partners to demonstrate compliance with the statement of recognition principles. It also legislates SSSF partners to actively enable the right of Aboriginal children to develop and maintain a connection with their family, community, culture, country and language.

The second amendment requires that the SSSF partners consult with the First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria and the Aboriginal children's commissioner as part of the process of preparing a SSSF plan. This ensures consultation is not just procedural but meaningful and directed toward accountability.

This amendment is also about embedding Aboriginal-led oversight within the development of the SSSF plans.

And our final amendment, the third amendment, inserts a provision within new section 20O, which requires that the SSSF progress report include an assessment from the First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria and the Aboriginal children's commissioner on whether their SSSF partner is meeting their responsibility in relation to Aboriginal children and families.

The Greens continue to be committed to working with the government to deliver solutions that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities have been calling for in the child protection system. While this bill is a step in the right direction, we must first address the root causes of involvement with the child protection system in the first place – drivers like poverty, housing insecurity and family violence. Without properly funding prevention and community-based supports, no ministerial and departmental coordination framework will be enough.

The Greens will not be opposing this bill today. We recognise the challenges it seeks to address and are of the view that ministers and departments must work together not just for the sake of children in out-of-home care, care leavers and their families, but to really ensure that they have the best chance to flourish in their futures, to have better access to education and better access to health care and to keep them away from the justice system.

Jacinta ERMACORA (Western Victoria) (14:35): I am pleased to speak on the Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Supporting Stable and Strong Families) Bill 2025. We know the phrase 'It takes a village to raise a child' is true, and this bill makes changes to cross-departmental responsibilities to vulnerable young Victorians not dissimilar to the principle expressed above. This bill is about improving the care of some of our most vulnerable children in Victoria, children who are interacting with the child protection system of the Victorian government, and it is about improving those children's lives. Many of these children have experienced abuse or witnessed abuse, and some of them experience post-traumatic trauma as a result, creating a whole range of challenges for them as they develop into adulthood. Some of them are continuing to experience challenging family dynamics. This bill creates a legislative framework to improve collaboration across government departments who are also responsible for elements of their care, especially in the preventative space, with the goal to improve outcomes for children and young families. 'Outcomes' sounds like a very bureaucratic word, but it essentially means healthier, stronger young people who are able to stay in school, able to stay in work and able to participate in society in an effective and constructive way.

The initial focus of the scheme will be specifically children for whom the Secretary of the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing has parental responsibility, children subject to a family reunification or family preservation order and their families, and young people under the age of 25 who have left statutory care. This will focus resources on those with the highest need and ensure children and families get the support they need. Over time the focus will broaden to include children and young people and their families receiving or requiring family services support and those at risk of engaging with the child protection system. This will support the system to focus on early intervention to prevent more children and families from entering the child protection system in the first place.

This bill introduces shared responsibilities and facilitates multidisciplinary and integrated planning and service delivery across government agencies. It also introduces increased reporting on outcomes for children and families. This bill will create shared responsibilities across the Victorian government under the supporting stable and strong families scheme. All ministers, department heads and the Chief Commissioner of Victoria Police will be given responsibility under the scheme. That means they will be required to take action to improve outcomes for vulnerable young Victorians involved in the state system. Ministers will set out how these responsibilities will be implemented in a supporting stable and strong families plan. Plans will set out a vision, measurable objectives and concrete actions. Ministers will table a report in Parliament on the progress towards those actions at the end of each two-year plan.

These changes draw upon successful experience in this in Scotland known as the corporate parenting model – a shocking name, if I might say. That scheme has operated successfully in Scotland since 2014. Corporate parenting, as they refer to it, refers to the collective responsibility of public bodies to care for and support children and young people who are looked after by the state. Corporate parents include the government, local authorities, health boards, police, education bodies and other public agencies. They must act in the same way a good parent would. This means safeguarding wellbeing, promoting opportunities, listening to young people's voices and supporting them to thrive into adulthood. Their responsibilities include improving educational attainment, physical and mental health, housing stability, employment opportunities and lifelong relationships. Corporate parenting is not limited to child protection. It includes young people vulnerable to state intervention. The ultimate goal is to reduce inequalities and improve long-term outcomes so that the young people experiencing care have the same life chances as their peers.

Scotland has seen a significant reduction in registrations for child protection since its corporate parenting program began. We are bringing these insights now to reform the Victorian approach. As the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare's interim CEO Dr Michele Lonsdale stated:

> Our sector leaders have long called for the Scottish model to be implemented and adapted to a Victorian context …

The bill makes it clear that raising children in care is a shared government responsibility, not the job of one department alone. Our government has reviewed the Scottish scheme and its outcomes. The bill before us today is therefore intended to bring similar operating principles into the Victorian system. The supporting stable and strong families scheme will ensure supporting at-risk children and families is no longer the responsibility of child protection alone. Every portfolio will play a role. We recognise that children's lives are multidimensional. Their needs vary across education, health, housing and community safety, indeed often spanning all of these areas at once. This ensures families get the right help when they need it. It makes clear that supporting vulnerable children and young people is a whole-of-government responsibility, not just that of the Minister for Children.

Our approach goes further than the Scottish scheme by creating a robust framework to hold government to account. The Children's Services Coordination Board will have responsibility for whole-of-government coordination. As I mentioned, all ministers will table a supporting stable and strong families plan for each of their portfolios in Parliament every two years. They will include actions to ensure that services are better targeted to the needs of at-risk children and families and delivering better outcomes. Plans will be informed by cross-government collaboration and key government priorities.

Another difference from the Scottish model is that it takes account of the needs of our First Nations people. Our approach differs from the Scottish model in that it recognises the specific need for recognition and support of the cultural identity of Aboriginal people. The Yoorrook Justice Commission report highlights that a key barrier to reunification for Aboriginal families is a lack of timely access to the services they need to support reunification. The bill directly responds to that. It requires decision-makers to have regard to and apply the recognition principles and to recognise and support the cultural identity of Aboriginal persons. Dallas Widdicombe, CEO of Bendigo & District Aboriginal Co-operative, has stated in relation to this bill:

> Too often, portfolio silos limit coordinated action and fail to recognise the shared responsibility to reduce the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in statutory systems.

This bill is intended to address those issues, and I commend it to the house.

Gaelle BROAD (Northern Victoria) (14:44): I appreciate the opportunity to speak on this bill, the Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Supporting Stable and Strong Families) Bill 2025. We sometimes see that the names or titles of bills can be a bit political, but certainly when it comes to supporting strong and stable families, that is an aspiration that I do support. The purpose of the scheme is to promote a whole-of-government approach to supporting vulnerable children in the child

protection system, their families and care leavers, and it gives government departments shared responsibility for people in the child protection system, requiring them to plan for and report to Parliament on how their respective portfolios will improve outcomes. I just want to highlight how important it is for kids to get a good start in life. We know that not all kids get a very good start at all. Time spent with kids is so important. Connecting with different generations is so important. We have seen the evidence. It does result in better health outcomes, better educational outcomes and better opportunities in life, but for some that is not the trajectory, they do not have a great start in life and they can end up in out-of-home care.

I do want to recognise the work of many people in our community who are doing their best to give young people the best opportunities. I know that around Bendigo there are many groups organising breakfasts at primary schools, because there are kids that do turn up to school with no food. There are chaplains doing amazing work. I remember going to Kyabram. They had their annual chaplaincy dinner last year. Liz Spicer has been working as a chaplain for so many years. We heard directly from kids that have really felt the benefits of that program, being able to meet and share a meal together. Just today I was talking to a guy, Brock, who is doing some volunteer work in Bendigo with the Street Peace program. They are working with disengaged youth around Bendigo, and they often meet in Bendigo Mall. They have had some really great outcomes where they have worked closely with young people. In one case there was someone that went into the Reject Shop and stole some goods. They picked that up, educated the young person and spoke with them, and they ended up going back to the Reject Shop, apologising and returning the goods. This is some of the work that is being done by volunteers. I have met with schools. I have been to schools, where some support workers are focused on wellbeing. They told me about the significant issues and challenges that they are facing in schools today that they have not seen previously. There are kids that are homeless that are attending school. These are the types of challenges that they are facing.

I have also met with foster carers who have told me about the challenges that they face and also the rewards that they face in being able to support kids who need that. Victoria clearly lags behind other states like New South Wales, which has increased the funding and support for foster carers, because there are significant costs involved, particularly in regional areas. There are long distances to travel to appointments. Some of these kids have very complex needs, and there are additional costs incurred with that and additional attention, support and services required. Right now in Victoria we have more people leaving the foster care system rather than coming in to assist, and I think that is something that we do really need to pay attention to, because when the foster care support is not available, that is where residential care can come into play. We know the statistics are very grim. I met with a young woman who grew up in residential care, and she talked about the direct impact that had on her life and on people that she knew and the terrible end result for a number of them because of what they had experienced in that environment. We have read and heard news reports that are simply horrific, and the needs are high.

Yet it is quite astounding, given the challenges that we face and given the cost pressures that families are under, that the government took the decision to cut Parentline last year. They cut funding for that program, and now Victoria is the only state without a parent support line, a dedicated service. Recently Nicole Werner highlighted on her very engaging social media – I encourage you to check it out if you have not – that a federal Labor member had actually sent out a list of phone numbers and included Parentline amongst them, which is quite extraordinary. The Liberals and the Nationals have made it clear that we will restore funding to Parentline if we are elected in November, because it is so important that small problems do not become big issues.

Giving kids the best start in life should be something that we all take an interest in. Many volunteers work in this space to help make a difference, but this bill is really focused on progress, plans and reports, annual reviews and department staff working together. Of course we do support more transparency and improved outcomes because they are desperately needed in this state. But what is not clear from this bill is whether spreading that responsibility, rather than it being in the child

protection portfolio, will result in better outcomes. There are no enforceable obligations, and stakeholders were not sure if the plans and reports would lead to real change, clear accountability and proper funding. Stakeholders also raised concerns about inadequate consultation, which is very relevant given the committee inquiry report that was tabled in this chamber today about this government's failure to consult with the community. That was reflected in the feedback received on this bill as well.

I know Ms Crozier highlighted in her contribution today the harm, abuse and exploitation of young children that continue to occur under this current government. There have been impacts from drug trafficking; there has been sexual exploitation, rape and suicide. When it comes to the most vulnerable in our society, I think about these kids trapped in a system that is failing to protect them. As Ms Crozier said, 600 kids in state care went missing last year. Now, I do recognise that there are people actively working in our community, professionals and volunteers, who are doing what they can to help make a difference to this system, and I certainly want to acknowledge their work and their dedication to helping others. But the number of reports is escalating, and we need to reverse this trend because every report does reflect a unique and personal story. It takes a village to raise a child. We hear that often, but we are all part of that village. An important role as MPs is to stand up for those who cannot stand up for themselves and who do not have a voice. This bill, as Ms Crozier said, is a plan for a plan when these kids need practical support and action.

David ETTERSHANK (Western Metropolitan) (14:52): I rise to make a contribution to the Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Supporting Stable and Strong Families) Bill 2025, which seeks to implement the supporting stable and strong families scheme. The bill aims to create a whole-of-government response to enhance service access and support earlier intervention for children, young people and families at risk of or involved with child protection, care services and family services systems. Under the scheme, all ministers, department heads and the Chief Commissioner of Victoria Police will have responsibilities for the supporting stable and strong families group, which includes that cohort who are or have been engaged with or are at risk of entering the child protection system. A key aspect of the scheme will be the development and implementation by those entities of a supporting stable and strong families plan. The plan will be tabled in Parliament biannually and at the end of two years the relevant ministers will report on the outcomes of the plan.

This scheme is based on the Scottish model of corporate parenting, as we have heard, which was introduced in the UK in 2014. I will talk a bit more about that in a moment. This bill is supposed to complement the Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Stability) Bill 2025, which we will be debating later this day. While we are supportive of the stability bill, which represents a positive move forward in the child protection space, we have some misgivings about this bill. The idea of a holistic whole-of-government approach to child protection is a laudable ambition. We are entirely supportive of the objectives of the bill. It is just that it does not do much in practical terms. In his second-reading speech, Minister Carroll stated:

> The Bill gives practical effect to this duty by introducing responsibilities across government, mandating integrated planning and service delivery across government areas such as housing, health, education, and justice.

That sounds great. He goes on to say:

> The scheme will provide the framework for government to work together, to identify gaps and challenges, and to deliver better services to children and families, and decision makers will be held to account for making this happen.

The problem is we have already seen any number of frameworks legislated that have made no real difference to the lives of the people that they are intended to help. A very important and pertinent example is the *Framework to Reduce Criminalisation of Young People in Residential Care*, which was launched in February 2022 and co-signed by the departments of health and human services and justice and community safety, and Victoria Police. As the name suggests, it is aimed at reducing the

number of young people in residential care who end up being criminalised for behaviour that does not need a law and order response. I have asked the Minister for Children about the rollout of this framework on a few occasions and was indeed once commended on the constructive way I phrased a question, which was pleasing. But despite the enlistment of various departments and Victoria Police in implementing the framework, it has not really made much of a difference. Nothing much has changed.

VALS, the Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service, continue to see children who are policed and charged due to their behaviour in residential care being criminalised, and they suggest that this might be because the framework is a long-term planning document rather than a policy that establishes standards for police and care providers to actually meet. I fear we are seeing the same thing with this scheme. It is all very broad and very vague. There are no real actionable responsibilities and there is no accountability other than the requirement to table plans and reviews in Parliament, and there are certainly no resources to support it. The scheme is not necessarily harmful, but it definitely has the potential to draw resources away from other more useful practical initiatives. Having said that, some stakeholders we have spoken to do fear it may do more harm than good. VALS has stated:

> In our view, what is being proposed is unlikely to lead to substantial reforms to the child protection system, nor improvements in how the state responds to the needs of Aboriginal children and families.
>
> Our main concern is what is being proposed in the Bill distracts from transformational, community-led reform that is driven by Aboriginal people and communities.

VALS have real concerns that if families are not seen to be engaging with the programs, it will be used against them and they will be further disadvantaged, and God knows they have seen that often enough. There are no details on how the scheme will operate, nor how the principles will influence decision-making at the individual specific case level, nor how it will compel the various agencies to actually work together. What is needed is some genuine and long overdue investment in the sorts of services and early intervention that do make a difference in keeping families stable and strong: housing, health and family violence services. The bill does not do anything to address these major service gaps. Without investment and accountability it risks being just another tick-the-box exercise.

There were similar concerns raised about the effectiveness of the Scottish corporate parenting model on which this bill is based. The UK all-party parliamentary group inquiry into the scheme in 2023 acknowledged that:

> … under-resourcing and inconsistent implementation have limited corporate parenting full potential.

And it acknowledged that:

> … the current corporate parenting principles are too broad and lack enforceable standards.

The inquiry recommended that the framework be amended to be more action-focused and specific, ensuring that organisations are held accountable for tangible outcomes. Stakeholders such as VALS, Djirra and the Federation of Community Legal Centres were also alarmed by the lack of consultation around the development of this bill. This bill apparently came out of nowhere with the barest minimum consultation.

At the end of the day, do we really need to import a scheme from overseas, particularly one with questionable effectiveness? We have already had any number of inquiries and reports that deliver a comprehensive blueprint for reforming the child protection system, including the *Yoorrook for Justice* report and successive inquiries by the Commission for Children and Young People. The Greens will be moving amendments to try to strengthen compliance and reporting, which we will be supporting and which we commend to the house. Legalise Cannabis Victoria will be supporting this bill. We sincerely hope this scheme will be resourced and implemented in good faith and that it will improve the outcomes of children and families caught up in the child protection system. At the very least we hope it will not distract the government from implementing meaningful reforms that demonstrably will.

John BERGER (Southern Metropolitan) (15:00): I rise to speak on the Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Supporting Stable and Strong Families) Bill 2025. This is a bill which, following extensive consultation, seeks to amend and improve the way in which institutions of the Victorian government approach and carry out their duties and responsibilities towards vulnerable children, vulnerable young people and vulnerable families. The bill seeks legislative change to ensure that the government approaches child protection with greater cross-departmental cooperation, an all-of-government approach to child protection and strengthened ministerial accountability. The ultimate aim of this is to improve service delivery and early interventions such that we can see better outcomes for some of the most vulnerable Victorians. Improving cross-departmental collaboration and better utilising existing resources to improve outcomes for vulnerable children, young people and families is not an idea which started with this bill. It has been the government's priority in the child protection space for some time now, and with this bill it is being enshrined into law.

Getting policy and service delivery in this area right is always difficult, which is why the stakeholder consultation which went into this bill is so important. It is also why new requirements for mandatory reporting for ministers, department heads and chief commissioners of police are so important. The vulnerable people who rely on or who have come into contact with the child protection and care system deserve to know that those responsible for running these systems are held to the highest levels of accountability. So too does the Victorian community at large deserve to know that these high standards of accountability are being fulfilled, standards which compel responsible individuals to create a plan for action related to their portfolio to protect vulnerable young people and to report publicly on their own performance in fulfilling those plans and improving outcomes. Those involved with the child protection system deserve it because it is their circumstances, their wellbeing and their life opportunities which are affected by the decisions made by the responsible individuals identified in this bill. The broader community deserves it because how a society treats its most vulnerable children and young people speaks to the moral character of that society. They deserve to know and be able to trust that children and young people in our community who face difficult life circumstances and who may have come into contact with the child protection and care systems will be given adequate care and that the system will run efficiently, effectively and in the best interests of those who it is charged with protecting and caring for.

This bill builds on reforms made by the Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Stability) Bill 2025, which supports families reuniting with their children following a reunification order from the Children's Court of Victoria. By seeking to reduce the duration of the child's contact with the statutory system where appropriate, that bill makes important progress towards creating a system which is better equipped to create the best possible outcomes for those in its care. This bill seeks to build on these reforms by ensuring that child protection is not the exclusive responsibility of the dedicated child protection services but is the responsibility of the whole of the Victorian government. This model seeks to replace a reactive approach to child protection with an approach which is proactive and which enshrines the collective responsibility of all parts of the government and all ministers for the protection of children into law. In doing so this bill will promote greater collaboration across departments, promote better early intervention and help families stay together, and it will help to ensure that each case is given the individual care and assistance suited to it.

I will go a little further into the specific mechanics of this piece of legislation shortly. For a moment I want to discuss why taking a whole-of-government approach to child protection is so important. I have already referenced the way that child protection should be seen as not just an occupation of specialists and social workers but a society-wide moral obligation. We cannot take the view that vulnerable children should be left in a box; nor should they be the responsibility of one small corner of government when the complexities of each of the individual cases mean they have diverse needs relating to many different areas of government. This government recognises that this level of complexity is inherent to the field of child protection and therefore is something the government must design its system around. The bill adjusts the existing legislation to better reflect the fact that due to this complexity all areas of government should have a part to play in keeping young people safe and

keeping families together in this state. In order to ensure that what we are discussing here – the importance of a properly functioning child protection system – does not remain just rhetoric used on the floor of Parliament this bill creates a proper framework for government accountability and reporting.

I will address some of the specific mechanics of the bill in creating a new framework. To facilitate best cross-departmental cooperation in the field of child protection, this bill will establish the supporting stable and strong families group. This group will be comprised of children under the age of 18 who are or have been child protection clients; children under the age of 18 who are receiving, have received or require but are not receiving services from a community service; children under the age of 18 whose primary family carer is receiving, has received or requires but is not receiving services from a community service; carer leavers under the age of 25; and parents and household members of children subject to family preservation orders and family reunification orders. Initially the focus will primarily be on those with the most need for government support, being those currently involved with the system and recent care leavers under the age of 25, with the aim of broadening the focus to include all of those in that group.

The bill also designates responsible individuals and outlines what their responsibilities will be under the law. The responsible individuals will be the ministers, department heads and the Chief Commissioner of Police. The responsibilities of these relate to service delivery, promoting and protecting the wellbeing of children and care leavers, and ensuring that children and care leavers experience equality and opportunity, ensuring that those in contact with the system receive the same opportunities as their peers outside the system do. Additionally, responsible individuals will be obligated to ensure that the child protection measures which they take on behalf of Aboriginal children are just and respect the cultural identity of the children. Taken as a whole, child protection has played a significant part of the parliamentary agenda in recent months. With that, I commend the bill to the house.

Georgie PURCELL (Northern Victoria) (15:07): I rise to speak on the Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Supporting Stable and Strong Families) Bill 2025 and wish to indicate from the outset that I will be supporting it. This bill will establish the supporting stable and strong families, or SSSF, scheme, creating shared responsibility across government departments for the wellbeing of vulnerable children and care leavers. The scheme will also shift the system's focus from immediate safety alone to children's long-term physical, cultural and developmental wellbeing. Importantly, the bill requires SSSF partners to table their plans and progress reports in Parliament, hopefully providing a level of accountability to ensure their responsibilities have been met.

The SSSF scheme is directly modelled on the Scottish corporate parenting model, which was later also adopted across the United Kingdom. This model has demonstrated that embedding cross-government responsibility can improve outcomes for children. That being said, evidence from Scotland and the UK has shown that improvements can still be made, and there are differences between what they have implemented and this bill. In a UK inquiry into care-experienced children and young people, participants still reported experiences of stigma, feeling ignored by professionals and being failed by systems meant to protect them. It has shown that proper resourcing and consistent implementation are required to ensure the model can truly succeed.

I have shared concerns with the government that the bill does not include adequate requirements to engage with children and young people in the development of the scheme or for partners to collaborate in the development and implementation of plans. Both of these areas are also key differences between this bill and the Scottish model, which sets out clear collaboration requirements. English legislation requires local authorities to encourage children and young people in the scope of the scheme to express their views, wishes and feelings and to take these into account. These are issues I will be exploring in the committee of the whole, and I do thank the minister's office for her engagement on this question and the bill more broadly.

On a similar note, I will be supporting the Greens amendments, which would particularly improve requirements to consult First Nations communities and actively develop connection with their culture.

I should not need to explain to the house why this is so critical. First Nations communities are overwhelmingly impacted by the failings in our child protection system. I sincerely hope that the passage of this bill and the Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Stability) Bill 2025 later today does not act as an excuse for the government to ignore other desperately needed improvements. Despite concerns about its implementation, I must be clear: this bill is about enacting the exact kind of early intervention that is so often spoken about in public policy spaces. It is a significant step towards a more collaborative whole-of-government approach to child and family wellbeing. It is recognising the reality already faced by the family services sector.

Children in the system rely on supports well beyond just one portfolio, particularly education, health, housing and justice. Young people leaving out-of-home care are amongst the most vulnerable in Australia, disproportionately experiencing poor outcomes across health, social and economic domains. I would like to highlight some figures to show the extent of this. As of 30 June 2024, 9208 children in Victoria were in out-of-home care. One in three care leavers become parents soon after leaving care. The 2020 *Keep Caring: Systemic Inquiry into Services for Young People Transitioning from Out-of-Home Care* from the Commission for Children and Young People found that a third of Victoria's young people leaving out-of-home care are homeless within three years. Young people in out-of-home care are also more likely to face educational engagement challenges and are more likely to face the criminal justice system.

To demonstrate the clear need for a whole-of-government approach I would like to share one example provided by a stakeholder, which is aggregated from two family situations that they have dealt with. A grandmother is caring for four children in a kinship care arrangement. Two children have disabilities. One is eligible for NDIS support; one has been deemed ineligible. The grandmother lives on the poverty line, and care payments do not meet all of the children's needs. One parent, who has mental health challenges, remains in the children's lives. Unresolved tensions between parent and grandparent create ongoing challenges. Without a car and with limited public transport access it is difficult to get the children to school and to appointments or for the grandmother to access the support that she needs. The older children are not attending school regularly, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation, sexual exploitation or criminal offending and at risk of deeper involvement in the statutory system. The other parent, who has a history of family violence, is currently incarcerated but will be released in several months, raising urgent questions about how this family will be kept safe.

Families with complex, often intergenerational challenges need a coordinated multiservice response to keep children safe and nurtured, connected to the supports that will enable them to grow and to lead healthy, strong and productive lives. All of this goes directly to the core purpose of this bill. These challenges cannot be faced within the silo of the child protection system and require the whole-of-government approach established through this bill. I want to thank all stakeholders who have enthusiastically engaged with my office on this bill, in particular the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare. I genuinely hope that the supporting stable and strong families scheme does not, as the opposition describes it, become yet another plan for a plan. I am, like many others, hopeful and optimistic about the kinds of coordinated outcomes that this piece of legislation can achieve, and I commend it to the house.

Tom McINTOSH (Eastern Victoria) (15:14): I am glad to rise to speak to this bill. I think it is really important that the government takes a holistic view on caring for children and supporting families. The fact that we are bringing responsibility to more ministers and department heads right across government, getting collective responsibility for our most important asset for Victoria – that is, our next generation – and ensuring that we are getting better outcomes I think is incredibly important.

I was fortunate enough to volunteer in fostering, which I spoke about back in my first speech when I first came into this place. It was an incredibly rewarding time for me to work with and support Victorian youth and see the incredible people that they are and support them on a journey that could sometimes be really difficult. Whatever touchpoint it is, whether it is early education, education pathways seeing them through their teenage years out into skills and higher education to get them into

that workforce, these points of contact all the way through their lives focus on supporting them to get the best outcomes: to get the best health outcomes, to get the best educational outcomes, to not leave them behind as they make their way towards adulthood and, when they do reach adulthood, to be able to have a fulfilling life, a life where they have the opportunities that we hope that all Victorians have – to go on and be able to afford to buy a home, have a family if they wish. This holistic wraparound I think is incredibly important and makes a difference to the lives of so many. I spoke in my first speech about my wonderful cousin, who went through a similar pathway and is now doing an incredible job. She has just gone through aged care and into nursing, with her kids and whatnot. I am incredibly proud to support this bill and everything it does. I will leave my contribution there.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (15:17): At the outset can I acknowledge the contributions of members in this place on this important bill. The bill before us today amends the Children, Youth and Families Act 2005 to create a nationally leading framework – indeed an internationally leading framework – in Victoria to improve collaboration across the government to improve outcomes for children, young people and families at risk of or already involved with child protection. We are introducing, in a legislative sense, shared responsibilities across government and facilitating integrated planning and service delivery across areas such as housing, health, education and justice. Importantly, the initial focus will be on children and young people and their families engaged with child protection, including parents and household members of children on family reunification orders and family preservation orders, as well as those in care and recent care leavers. Without offending anticipation, I also draw the attention of this chamber to the focus on parents of children on family reunifications under the initial focus of the scheme. Over time the focus will broaden to the rest of the priority cohort, including children and young people and their families receiving or requiring family services support and those at risk of engagement with child protection, driving an increased focus on early intervention.

As members in this place have noted, the reform before us today is informed by the Scottish corporate parenting model operating since 2014. I have spoken to officials firsthand and seen the impact these reforms have had on their child protection system. Whilst in their discussions with me they have shown the impact on children and young people in care, the model is also having an important impact on driving early intervention before problems escalate. In 2022–23 the Scottish child protection system experienced a 24 per cent reduction in child protection registrations and a 27 per cent reduction in children starting to be looked after, as it is termed in the Scottish system, since 2015–16. In comparison, Victoria had an increase in substantiations of 4 per cent over the same time. In that same timeframe the Scottish system also had a 23 per cent decrease in the number of children on the child protection register and a 20 per cent decrease in the number of looked-after children. Over the same time Victoria experienced a 9 per cent increase in the number of children in care or on care and protection orders.

Over time I want this nation-leading framework to have the same impact for Victoria's child protection system, but I also recognise the need to go further than Scotland to have an approach that better supports coordination and accountability. This is through legislating the role of the Children's Services Coordination Board to support the administration of the scheme, providing for specific outcome measures to be prescribed, ensuring clear data on progress being made and requiring ministers to table progress reports in Parliament, holding them to account for the impact they are making.

I see the promise in this framework before us today, and I want to acknowledge Mrs Werner in the other place for the bipartisan approach and the engagement that both the shadow minister and her team have had with my office on this bill. For this framework to be enduring, it must be bipartisan. I acknowledge and thank Mrs Werner for her support. When child protection policy is above politics, it shows the best of our political system. The bill – without, again, intending anticipation – and another we will discuss later today have been the result of significant consultation over numerous years.

The child protection and family services sector have called for the establishment of a corporate parent model in Australia for a significant period of time, and whilst it is often dangerous in these

circumstances to single some people out, there are a few that I want to note in particular. Karen Heap, the CEO of the Ballarat and District Aboriginal Cooperative and president of the Aboriginal Children and Young People's Alliance, spoke to me on how we need to better break down the silos across government to drive integrated support for children in care. This message has been strong in the three years I have been engaging with the Aboriginal community controlled organisations: families do not work in silos and government should not either. Anne McLeish and Kinship Carers Victoria have stated that the apparent hesitancy within the Victorian Parliament to pass the Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Supporting Stable and Strong Families) Bill 2025 has carers baffled. This bill has arisen from long-held discussions between the office of the Minister for Children, the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing and agencies across the child protection sector and has support from kinship carers. Kinship care is the largest form of out-of-home care in Victoria, with kinship carers raising the vast majority of Victoria's vulnerable children. Therefore the opinions of kinship carers matter in all deliberations about what is best for children.

I want to particularly acknowledge Paul McDonald at Anglicare Victoria. Through his roles at both Anglicare and Home Stretch, Paul has been a constant advocate for the corporate parent approach in Victoria, and it was Paul who first linked me with Mark Riddell, the national implementation adviser for care leavers in the UK, who has offered valuable insights into how their approach could be adapted to the Victorian context through this bill. I also want to acknowledge the previous CEO of the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare and the now National Children's Commissioner Deb Tsorbaris and also the interim CEO at the centre Dr Michele Lonsdale. Both Deb and Michele have well articulated the voice of organisations and individuals they represent in their advocacy for this approach. Michele stated in a recent public statement:

> Our sector leaders have long called for the Scottish model to be implemented and adapted to a Victorian context …

In addition, the feedback and insights from forums such as the Aboriginal Children's Forum, the broader children and family services sector and the ministerial youth advisory committee, made up of young people with lived experience, have been key to the development of this reform. As well, conversations with parents and carers through a series of round tables ensured as a government we were hearing directly from carers on their experiences of supporting children in care in Victoria and vulnerable families. The ministerial youth advisory committee – as I said, made up of young people in care – emphasised in their discussion with me on this reform that there was a need to have public accountability and to ensure that every minister delivers a plan and is held accountable. As noted in the second-reading speech for this bill, the Aboriginal Children's Forum spoke to the strength of community and the shared obligation to raise children doing it tough. Through this bill, this is exactly what we are doing, through every minister and through every portfolio, ensuring that plans are tabled in Parliament every two years and at the end of the two years a progress report is tabled in this place, because we agree that this must be a systemic approach. And to improve collaboration, we are ensuring that the Children's Services Coordination Board has new functions in monitoring system performance and coordinating the implementation of the scheme.

I did want to address briefly a few elements that have been raised within the debate, in particular the partners as they are defined in the bill being required to take actions that might conflict with their primary duties. As provided for under new section 20L(1)(e), the bill requires a plan to be set out if a partner's functions under this scheme conflict or are incompatible with their primary functions, duties and powers or duties at common law or in equity and the extent and impact of this incompatibility. There has also been much discussion around collaboration. The bill encourages and facilitates collaboration between supporting stable and strong families partners by enabling the preparation of joint plans by two or more supporting stable and strong families partners who are ministers; requiring supporting stable and strong families partners who are ministers to take into account guidance provided by the Children's Services Coordination Board; requiring supporting stable and strong families partners who are ministers to have regard to advice provided by other ministers and the

intersection between supporting stable and strong families and government priorities in their supporting plans; requiring that supporting stable and strong families plans include a statement of how regard has been given to the outcome measures in determining the plan of actions; providing a function for the Children's Services Coordination Board to provide advice to the responsible minister in relation to the intersection between supporting stable and strong families responsibilities and government priorities, the preparation of the plans and whether new or revised outcome measures may be required; and, further, providing a function for the Children's Services Coordination Board to issue guidance to supporting stable and strong families partners, including on key priorities to be addressed.

I also want to address the question of oversight, and I think this was one particular matter that was also raised by Ms Gray-Barberio in relation to quoting from a report from the UK. My apologies, Ms Gray-Barberio, if I have wrongly attributed that to you when someone else mentioned that. But as I said in my opening remarks, accountability and oversight were indeed one of the matters that we have discussed at length with representatives of the UK government and in particular the Scottish government and have also sought to address through the provisions in this bill. That is why I say and why I think they would say that in many respects we are overtaking their legislation.

I also reject the premise that First Peoples were not consulted. Indeed, as I said in my acknowledgements, one of the first people who spoke to me about this idea was the president of the Aboriginal children's alliance. But through years of listening and engagement with the members of the Aboriginal Children's Forum as a whole and advocacy from First Peoples organisations such as the alliance, we have pursued the legislation before us today.

Regarding the recognition principles that were legislated unanimously by this chamber a few years ago, new section 20I(d)(i) ensures supporting stable and strong families partners have a responsibility in relation to Aboriginal persons to have regard to and apply the recognition principles. So we would say that the bill does indeed already do that.

This bill has been a long time in the making. I acknowledge those who have been advocates of it from the beginning and those who have been consulted and provided us with their wisdom, from our own amazing community stakeholders here in Victoria to those overseas. I particularly want to take this opportunity to acknowledge the work of the department and my office, and I am very pleased to commend the bill to the house.

Motion agreed to.

Read second time.

Committed.

Committee

Clause 1 (15:29)

Georgie CROZIER: Minister, I referred in my contribution to the Cummins report of 2012, *Report on the Protecting Victoria's Vulnerable Children Inquiry*. In the conclusion of that – I am not sure if you heard – there were the major system reforms. The first one was a vulnerable children and family strategy, a whole-of-government vulnerability policy framework with the objective of focusing on a child's needs. Could you explain to the house the difference between those reforms that were suggested by the Cummins report and what you are trying to do here, given I understand that it is the Scottish model but it still goes to the overarching objective I think of having a whole-of-government vulnerability framework. Is that correct?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: What we are doing here is – I know you understand the Scottish corporate model – as I said in my concluding remarks, we have taken our inspiration in large part from the Scottish model. We do indeed in a number of ways go further than the Scottish model, but we are responding to what we see today as the challenges in the system and not responding to Cummins.

Georgie CROZIER: I note in your summing-up you acknowledged the dialogue I think with Mrs Werner, and I have been speaking with her as well throughout the course of the last couple of weeks. One of the concerns I think she heard from a number of stakeholders was about various bits of consultation. I think there has been a large degree of consultation, from what I can understand, but there were perhaps groups that were not consulted. But to go back to the model, some of the feedback that she has received is that it seems to be overly bureaucratic and process-driven. The Scottish model, if I am correct, mandates collaboration between public bodies, whereas this Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Supporting Stable and Strong Families) Bill 2025 makes joint planning optional and creates no enforceable rights. Is that an accurate assessment?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: There is a bit in that question. If I leave something out, feel free to come back to me. But at its heart, as you acknowledge, there has been a large amount of consultation. One of the things that people have raised was that a number of things in the Scottish model were indeed – I do not want to say not bureaucratic enough, but there was in many respects a promise that needed to be made as to how you bring it all together. What we have tried to do in a framework sense is to incorporate into what we have here – it is not intended to be overly bureaucratic, but it is intended to provide that there is an overall Children's Services Coordination Board that can ensure that plans are complementary; that where systems need to work together, the children's services board can bring that work together in a collaborative way; and that there will be specific outcome measures that are able to be reported against. Therefore in many respects we are one of the most transparent – and you and I might go toe to toe about this at other times – in how we account for our child protection data as it is, between the Productivity Commission, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and what we publicly choose to report in any case. But what this will do is create outcome measures, agreed and tabled, that will then be able to be publicly reported against, and everyone will have that visibility and be able to hold them to account. While it is not intended to create a bureaucratic imposition for anyone, it is intended to ensure that there is that level of accountability that was in many respects missing from the original version of the Scottish model.

Georgie CROZIER: Again, just in relation to that reporting obligation and the practical application, you have got a number of ministers that are responsible. Can you outline which ministers they will be?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: All of them. Every minister will have to table a plan that shows how their department is –

Georgie CROZIER: Every minister in government?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Every minister will table their own corporate parent plan, plus the Chief Commissioner of Police, for example. But there will be that cooperation, and there will also be that opportunity for the children's services board to bring those plans together, not necessarily to merge them but to ensure that they have oversight or that where there is a joint activity that could be a joint activity. I am ad-libbing here now, but you have both me and Minister Carroll in the Department of Education. There may indeed be opportunities for us to work on some things collaboratively. There may also be other things that are very specific to schools or very specific to early education settings.

Georgie CROZIER: I think you have misinterpreted me, Minister. You just referred to education and yourself, and I was clarifying: is it every minister in every department – local government, planning – that is going to develop these plans, or is it just specifically relating to child protection, like health, education, police? That is what I am just trying to work out: is it that every single minister in government will have to do a plan? You are nodding yes?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Yes.

Georgie CROZIER: Therefore my next question is – that seems enormous. So the coordination board will be overseeing all of those plans, and as you said, there might be some duplication. I think that is where the concern is around the bureaucracy and the process and the duplication of how those

plans are all married together – and then they have got an obligation to report. But I am wondering, if they all come together with their plans – the Minister for Local Government has their plan in relation to this, the Minister for Education has their plan; everybody else has their plans – I fail to understand why they are not focused in the particular areas where the bill itself sets out the definitions and partly where I was going to too with the Cummins inquiry and the outcome areas which you specifically highlight: health, education, justice, housing, Aboriginal self-determination, employment. I see those ministerial responsibilities, and I am just wondering how all of the others will then have a role to play without the coordination board being totally overridden with a lot of plans that are sitting in a folder without actually doing what they are intended to do.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: That is right. As you said, the domains, if you like – health, education, justice, housing, Aboriginal self-determination and employment – are where we want to see improved outcomes for vulnerable children and families. It is, as the government contends with this piece of legislation, the responsibility of the whole of government to ensure that every part of government is working to do its bit to ensure that we can achieve against the outcomes that will be set in each of those domains. There may be more work for some departments – education – than there might be for others, and certainly the work that has happened in the UK and particularly in Scotland has been whole of government in different ways. There might be things that the transport minister could do to facilitate better transport opportunities for children living in care to be able to access a particular school or whatnot. So there are ways in which that work can come together, and there are certainly roles for each and every minister in government in what we envisage here as an opportunity to ensure that as a whole of government we are delivering a service system that provides for children and vulnerable families.

Georgie CROZIER: I understand that in terms of the responsibility of each of those ministers. So you as the minister for child protection will have ultimate oversight – is that the case? Who will oversee to make sure that the work is actually being done? Is that the coordination board with those elements, or is it you as minister?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Ultimately, it will be the Parliament. The outcome measures will be agreed and will be tabled, and the corporate plans will then have to be tabled in Parliament by each and every minister to say, 'This is what we're going to do to meet these outcomes.' Then the Parliament will ultimately be responsible for holding those ministers to account in meeting those outcomes.

Georgie CROZIER: In terms of the data collection – and I spoke in my debate about some of the horrific statistics that we are dealing with, the numbers of investigations being undertaken, the number of children that have gone missing under care – who has responsibility? Is that under police or is that under child protection? How many children are attending school – is all that data going to be collected and put in these reports to Parliament? Is that what this bill intends to do?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: As I said, the outcome measures will be agreed. One outcome measure in relation to the schools plan could be school attendance, and then that outcome measure would need to be reported on by the education minister – both the strategies in terms of how they will influence school attendance for this vulnerable cohort and then also what the outcomes are. That would be in the plan and reported to Parliament, and Parliament have the opportunity to hold the education minister to account on that.

Georgie CROZIER: But will it be data? Will it be number of children in the system at any one point in time, number of children attending school? I appreciate it is hard in many instances in this area to be exact, but if you know that roughly over a six-month period or a three-month period X number of children are in state care and only 60 per cent are turning up to school – and I have got no idea of the data – will that be reflected in those reports to Parliament? I understand what you are trying to do is get better educational attainment and outcomes, but surely you have got to have data points, like we do in health. We actually have response times and the number of people waiting for surgery, and they are three-monthly data points. Will this bill have similar data points?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: That is my intention. Examples could include school attendance, learning outcomes, completion rates for children in out-of-home care, access to mental health assessments for at-risk children in the mental health portfolio, housing parents on family reunification orders who receive access to housing from the public housing waiting list and children entering care who have received a health assessment and how many of those are then connected with the necessary services. It is absolutely my intention – in the same way as we see it in other parts of government, and in my view, in many respects, we have not done it enough in this regard – that this is a legislative framework that provides for us to do exactly what you are asking.

Georgie CROZIER: That is excellent to have that clarification. My final couple of questions are regarding the police, given their prominence in this bill and their lead. I made comments around sexual exploitation. No-one wants to see this happen – I understand that – or the criminal activity that is undertaken by perpetrators who are exploiting these young, vulnerable children in care. The police have a major role in this, and for the children that are in care there is no doubt that they would be caught up in the criminal justice system, and the police have a role to try and keep them out. So that lead role for police – do they have the same reporting? Are they going to be reporting, or do they have a specific role that they need to play, given the prominence that they have in this model that you have got in this legislation?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: The Minister for Police will report in the same way as all of the other ministers and the Premier will report. They will work with the police commissioner. I have had discussions in the preparation of this bill with both the previous acting chief commissioner and the new chief commissioner about exactly these issues that you raise. Indeed one of the very good examples in Scotland is the police's corporate parent plan in terms of how they work with vulnerable cohorts and also the intersection of that with some of their work. You cannot take a loan, if you like, from the corporate parent model without some of the other working crime prevention in the Scottish model as well. They actually intersect. But certainly we have had those discussions. I would also just add, for the record: this is not in any way intended to prevent or interfere with the operations of police, but certainly it is intended that the Minister for Police will table a plan and work with police in the operation of that plan.

Georgie CROZIER: What role will the commissioners for children and young people have – both the commissioner for Aboriginal children and young people and more broadly? What role will they have in terms of the reporting and what they will do, given that the reporting is now going to be tabled and reported to Parliament on a regular basis? What role will they have and how will they work with the whole-of-government approach as well?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: The Commission for Children and Young People obviously maintains its independent oversight functions, and the commission can continue to recommend policy, program and funding reforms, as it does now, across government and in relation to any of the work of government, including that it may be consulted in the design of specific initiatives or implementation of those initiatives, for example. However, it would be unusual for an independent oversight body to have a formal role in being consulted about the models that they would then be responsible for oversighting, if you like. But their independent oversight functions remain and extend to these elements as well.

Georgie CROZIER: So they will have the same reporting?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Yes, they do not do a plan.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Minister, just for clarification, what is the role of the minister and their department in relation to the scheme? This is just in relation to understanding expectations around administering and ensuring that all supporting stable and strong families (SSSF) partners are being accountable to the plans and the progress reports.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: I am not sure if I fully understand your question, Ms Gray-Barberio, so feel free to pull me up. The oversight is ultimately with the Parliament, so the role of each and every minister, including the Premier, is to table their plan, apply their plan and then account for their plan. But ultimately the oversight role belongs to the Parliament.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Thank you, Minister, for clarifying that. Just following that, when it comes to information sharing, how will the scheme ensure that gaps are not still wide open when it comes to the wellbeing of children in care, especially care leavers with the barriers that they face? How will the government ensure that information-sharing loopholes and gaps are closed up?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: The bill intends that collaboration will be similar in practice to that of the Scottish corporate parent scheme. As I spoke to in my summing-up, Ms Gray-Barberio, that aim is to be achieved in different ways, but ultimately the bill encourages and facilitates collaboration between partners by enabling the preparation of joint plans, as I was saying to Ms Crozier, by two or more SSSF partners who are ministers, if that is required – I do not have the written section here, but I can get that for you if you need it; requiring SSSF partners who are ministers to take into account guidance provided by the Children's Services Coordination Board in preparing their SSSF plans, which would be new section 20K(2) of the act; requiring partners who are ministers to have regard to advice provided by other ministers and the intersection between SSSF and government priorities in preparing their plans – that would be new section 20K(3) of the act; requiring that plans include a statement of how regard has been given to the outcome measures in determining the plan of actions, and that would be new section 20L(1)(c) of the act; providing a function for the board to provide advice to the responsible minister in relation to the intersection between SSSF responsibilities and government priorities, the preparation of plans and whether new or revised outcome measures may be required, which would be new section 15(c) of the Child Wellbeing and Safety Act 2005; and providing a function for the board to issue guidance to partners, including key priorities to be addressed in the plans, which would be new section 15(d)(ii) of the act.

While these provisions of the bill are framed differently to section 60 of the Scottish legislation, it is important to note that drafting of legislation provisions is not always directly aligned and not applicable across jurisdictions, which is why organisations like the centre for excellence and others have asked for it to be applied in the Victorian context, and that is exactly what we have done and responded to. It has been necessary to adapt the Scottish model to suit the Victorian context, including to account for differences in how our government is structured and how laws are drafted. The intent of the bill is that the SSSF partners will produce and implement their plans collaboratively across government while retaining the same flexibility to tailor the degree of collaboration based on their priorities under the scheme and what it is that they are indeed contributing to the domains. The governance and oversight provided by the board will be critical in ensuring that there is a whole-of-government collaboration embedded in the scheme.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Will you be expecting to see higher rates of reunification from the implementation of this bill? I think in your summing-up you said the Scottish government saw a downward trend in child protection, but the model was actually introduced in 2014. That is seven to eight years where they actually started to see that trend going down. You also said that this is going to go further than the Scottish model. In saying that, do you have KPIs that you are working towards to ensure that it is not going to take eight years to see a downward trend, or could you possibly let the chamber know: have you done any possible modelling around it as well to see what that would look like and how long that might take?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: I would love to have a magic wand and wave it and instantly resolve many of the issues we all deal with day in, day out, but the reality is that reform takes time. The quotes that you referred to that I quoted in my summing-up are from 2022–23 in the Scottish child protection system, and I was comparing this to the Victorian context to show what had happened in a period of time in Scotland versus what had happened in a period of time in Victoria – countries that, whilst very different, also have some similarities in how you could apply this type of model. I was using the

2022–23 data to show that in Scotland they experienced a 24 per cent reduction in child protection registrations and a 27 per cent reduction in children starting to be looked after, as they call it in the Scottish system. That is since 2015–16, so that is over time.

In comparison, Victoria has had an increase in that same period of time of over 4 per cent. In that same timeframe the Scottish system also had a 23 per cent decrease in the number of children on the child protection register and a 20 per cent decrease in the number of looked-after children. Over the same time Victoria experienced a 9 per cent increase in the number of children in care. I was taking those periods of time to show what had happened here in Victoria versus what had happened in Scotland. In many ways we are hopeful we have the vision that what we have achieved through this bill, through establishing this type of a framework, will actually have the whole-of-government levers, if you like, on making sure we get the best outcome for these children – an outcome that any parent would want for their own child – that that is considered by each and every minister, not just by whoever happens to be the child protection minister of the day, and that we use all levers available across government to ensure that we are getting the best outcome for these children and families.

For my comments in relation to reunification orders, without offending anticipation of the subsequent bill that we also have to consider, I have the very strong view that in order to support families to reunify in the best interests of children such as it is safe to do so, then we need to make sure – and I know you would agree with me on this – that we provide for children and families all of the services they need that support that reunification. My hope, my vision, is that through a framework, a system like this, where we hold every minister accountable, where the Parliament holds every minister accountable, and where, to Ms Crozier's point, we have the data in front of us and everyone makes decisions based on what the data is, we then are all making decisions that ultimately lead to the same sorts of reductions in children known to the child protection system as we have seen in Scotland.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: I just want to ask you a question around what happens when a minister holds two portfolios. Perhaps we can use you, Minister. You are Minister for Children and Minister for Disability. What happens, for example, when a care leaver also has a disability; obviously they belong to a vulnerable cohort. Does that then mean, in terms of achieving these outcomes, that they will have better access to seamless NDIS support, say, into disability housing? What happens there when one minister is holding two pretty important portfolios that could assist in young leavers getting better outcomes?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Ministers would need to table plans that address both of their portfolios, and again, this is where we need to make sure that they work together. Notwithstanding that, taking your example of the NDIS, NDIS is a Commonwealth responsibility, so it complicates it in terms of answering. But just to be clear, and I think going to what really is the heart of your question, the obligation is to provide for plans that address both – in my case both the disability portfolio and the children portfolio – noting that they would –

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: There would be separate plans or one?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: There would be one minister tabling one plan that addresses disability and that addresses children. Obviously, for example, within children – and this already happens for me on a daily basis; there are three departments that work with me as Minister for Children, which are the Department of Health, the Department of Education and the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing – my plan in relation to children would address issues that are across the departments. So it is tabled by a minister and addresses whatever portfolios the minister holds.

David ETTERSHANK: Minister, could I ask you a couple of questions, if I may, about subordination of SSSF responsibilities. Why are SSSF responsibilities expressly subordinated to ministers' primary statutory functions under new sections 20H(3) and 20H(4)?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: It is effectively addressing the point that responsibilities under the plan cannot conflict with statutory responsibilities at law. To go to Ms Crozier's questions earlier about

Victoria Police, they would be a good example. Operationally, the police's first and foremost obligations are their statutory functions, but there will also obviously be a role for the Minister for Police and the work of their corporate plan.

David ETTERSHANK: Can I just follow on from that then in terms of how the scheme can meaningfully shape big important areas like housing, policing, justice and health decisions if ministers are not required to consider the SSSF expectations when exercising those primary responsibilities?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: There is a new section, 20L(1)(e), which also requires that SSSF plans set out the extent of any of those identified conflicts or incompatibilities with the primary functions, duties and powers of SSSF partners that are ministers, including where no actions are to be taken in relation to the functions under new section 20H(1) or (2) to the extent of the conflict or incompatibility. This will provide an additional layer of transparency and accountability for partners when developing their plans and actions through having to explain their decision-making with respect to not committing to particular actions. Ultimately, as I have said a number of times now, the Parliament is responsible for oversight and accountability of that.

David ETTERSHANK: I think I get what you are saying there, but could I just ask you: where a conflict arises between the portfolio responsibilities of an individual minister and the SSSF responsibilities, will SSSF plans be required to explain how those conflicts were resolved?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: I will refer you to my earlier answer, Mr Ettershank. Ultimately, the conflicts are declared. Again, if we take the example of Victoria Police, they would arrest somebody according to the law, not according to the SSSF. Those conflicts would be declared, they would be known and there would be transparent accountability, which ultimately sits with all of us, including you, Mr Ettershank, as to whether or not they are held to account. We cannot have a situation where some of, say, the operational requirements of Victoria Police might in some way be then impeded by the requirements of a plan. Hence these issues would be worked through. They would be supported to be worked through by the children's services board and all of those collaboration functions, which I have already outlined and would refer you to. Ultimately, the oversight of all of that is the responsibility of this place.

David ETTERSHANK: Just for the purposes of clarity then, Minister, will that process of resolution of conflicts of priority, that reconciliation process, be specifically addressed in the SSSF plans? I get it in the context where you are talking about the cops and very specific obligations. But if we are looking at more generic areas like housing or health, will there be a requirement to specifically explain how conflicts have been resolved?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Again I refer you to new section 20L(1)(e) and my earlier answer.

Georgie PURCELL: Minister, we have heard from many family service providers that they are regularly supporting families to navigate access to the NDIS, non-government education and other non–state government services. Is the government open to extending the collective responsibility created by this bill beyond Victorian government departments?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Thank you for the way you and your office have engaged on this bill. The bill contains clause 5, a regulation power that allows the minister of the day to prescribe additional SSSF partners so further partners can be written in. Certainly our primary focus is ensuring that we get the collective responsibility across government departments right in the first instance before we consider additional partners. It is really important that the bill is futureproofed as an enduring scheme for the government and therefore gives us the opportunity to add in further partners down the track and along the way. I do want to stress, however, that in the current legislative schemes, as at today, ministers and departments make a range of decisions which impact on organisations outside of government – and there would be many of those in the child protection and family services space – through funding and grant agreements in particular, through the design and commissioning of government-funded services, through our community service organisations and partners or through

system settings, for example, in non-government schools. So, in acquitting their SSSF responsibilities, partners may choose to use those other system levers, if you like, to improve outcomes for the cohorts we are talking about. The education minister's levers with the non-government school sector, for example, might be a way in which to draw in the non-government school sector's support for how we better help vulnerable children and families in their system, as well as those that might be in the government-funded system.

Georgie PURCELL: How will ministers responsible for SSSF plans have regard to the views of those with lived experience in the child protection system, and is there regular consultation with children and young people planned for the development of the SSSF plans?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Through this bill and the amendments to the Child Wellbeing and Safety Act, at clause 7 it requires that the Children's Services Coordination Board consider the views of persons who are or have been in the SSSF group for the purpose of giving advice currently to me certainly, as the responsible minister, and indeed to the children's services board so that that can then be incorporated more broadly. This will likely include consultation with the ministerial youth advisory group and other existing client voice forums. I do have a ministerial youth advisory group of children and young people who either are in care or have recently been in care, and indeed they provided good advice in relation to this very proposal. In particular they were very firm about the need for each and every minister to be accountable and to show how they have acquitted their actions. Those views have absolutely been incorporated into this, down to the naming of the bill – they had very strong views about what we should and should not name the bill as well – and I thank them for their suggestions and input.

Certainly it is intended that, through the whole of the system that we are seeking to set up here, the views of those with lived experience really guide the development of the plans and their implementation, and indeed that has been a feature of the overseas models. I had the opportunity to meet with young people who have been involved in consultation, lived-experience consultation, in the UK as well, and again they had really strong views and ideas about how we could make our system stronger than what has been evolving across the United Kingdom and particularly in Scotland. So I absolutely agree with you. The voice of lived experience is more important than any other, and we need to make sure we have ways in which that is included. We need to ensure that that is done in a way that is also appropriate, particularly given the experiences of trauma often associated with or belonging to those who are particularly vulnerable, particularly those who are part of our child protection system, and that the voices of the first cohort of children and families that we are seeking to have this system really set up for are included but in a way that is cognisant of their particular needs and complexities.

Georgie PURCELL: How will you ensure that SSSF partners work collaboratively in developing and implementing SSSF plans?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: The bill certainly intends that there be collaboration. It provides for it very specifically in the legislation. It encourages and facilitates collaboration between partners by requiring partners who are ministers to take into account guidance provided by the Children's Services Coordination Board in preparing their plans. As I said, the advice of the Children's Services Coordination Board will also be informed by people with lived experience, requiring partners who are ministers to have regard to advice provided by other ministers and the intersection between the SSSF and government priorities in preparing their plans – that is new section 20K(3); enabling the preparation of joint plans by two or more partners who are ministers – that is new section 20J(5); requiring the SSSF plans to include a statement of how regard has been given to the outcome measures in determining the plan of actions to be taken – new section 20L(1)(c); and providing a function for the Children's Services Coordination Board to provide advice to me as the responsible minister in relation to the intersection between responsibilities and government priorities and the preparation of the plans.

Georgie PURCELL: Is the government open to embedding a legislative right of all children to have equal access to care and supports across departments and sectors?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: In many respects, in my view, the entire framework is about ensuring that we get to – particularly children and vulnerable families – the fundamental services that give them the right to equal access across education and across health. I guess what I am trying to say is there is a recognition that some people will always need more support than others to achieve equal outcomes as others, and what this does is set up a system that, if you like, makes sure that those who fit within a particular cohort get access to the services they need and that they have across the whole of government a parent that is ensuring, in the same way as you might advocate for your own child, that the government is advocating for other children who otherwise do not have somebody to advocate for them and ensuring that they get that equal access to services. So equal access to service provision is really at the heart of these reforms, in my view.

Georgie CROZIER: Just one last question, if I may. It is my understanding that the model put in place in Scotland cost around £500 million. What is the expected cost to implement this framework?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: At the outset the corporate plans – the SSSF plans – are not funding commitments in and of themselves, but they will obviously inform, and the implementation of things will inform, how government might choose to organise finances. But there is one really good example that I often use when talking about this new model. There are many initiatives and many things that government could do better with better cross-collaboration, and one of them relates to the public housing waitlist, for example. Probably two years ago when I first became minister it struck me that there was not a priority on the public housing list for families on reunification orders. Working between portfolios, we were able to ensure that access to public housing was not something that necessarily held families back from reunification, because they had that service priority, if you like, to ensure that they were able to get the housing that they needed to ensure that they could provide a roof over their children's heads and then be able to support family reunification. That was simply a way in which we worked with the housing portfolio, with Minister Shing and Minister Brooks before her, to ensure that we had that prioritisation. It did not necessarily cost additional dollars; it was just about how we as a system work to better support vulnerable children and families. There will no doubt be things in plans that might inform investment opportunities, but there may also be – and I am sure will be – many things that we can just do better to make sure that government is working as a whole in the interests of vulnerable children and families.

Georgie CROZIER: So you are not requiring additional budget funding to implement the reforms – not the coordination board or having additional funding for that?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Not specifically at this point in time. As we know, there is already a children's services board. If there is a need to make applications for funding, that would be done through the budget processes in the usual way. There may be things that inform some of those decisions, but there is not a specific dollar to the entirety of the reform.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Given new section 20D creates no legal rights and no cause of action, what concrete consequences will apply if a minister fails to prepare or implement an SSSF plan within the required timeframes?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: As we have said a number of times now, the ultimate accountability is that of the Parliament, and it will be up to each and every one of us, including you, Ms Gray-Barberio, to ensure that ministers are held to the plans that they table in Parliament and account for the impact of those plans. As we discussed with Ms Crozier, it is certainly my intention that there be very specific data points in those plans. If ministers then are not meeting their obligations or their plans in a way that then helps achieve the data points in the outcomes measures – if ministers' plans do not achieve those outcome measures – then it is up to the Parliament to hold them accountable.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Minister, why does new section 20D exclude limited review or enforceability where SSSF obligations are not met? And what is the policy justification for denying families any mechanism of accountability?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Sorry, could you repeat the second half of your question?

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Sure. The second half is: what is the policy justification for denying families any mechanism of accountability?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: The bill requires SSSF partners who are ministers, obviously, to prepare their plans, report progress, and transmit that to Parliament, as we have discussed a number of times. The bill is consistent with the approach taken by other accountability mechanisms in a parliamentary sense. One example might be the multi-agency risk assessment and management (MARAM) framework. The bill is designed to respond at the cohort level rather than providing new rights to specific individuals as such. So new section 20D makes it clear that the scheme does not create in any person any legal right – this is system reform, not individual reform; does not give rise to any civil cause of action and is not to be taken into account in any such action affecting in any way the interpretation of any act or law in force in Victoria; and does not affect the validity or provide grounds for review of any judicial or administrative act or omission. This reduces the risk of litigation associated with it. The intention is to ensure that resources are used on the delivery of improved services rather than litigation. This is consistent with section 8 of the Gender Equality Act 2020 and section 85 of the Statewide Treaty Act 2025, for example. A similarly worded provision to new section 20D can also be found at section 10 of the Carers Recognition Act 2012, which states that the care relationship principles that are set out in the act do not create or confer on any person any right or entitlement enforceable at law. So it was based on similar provisions where what we are talking about is system reform rather than individual entitlement as such.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Will the progress reports being provided by the SSSF partners be required to identify failures, reasons for non-delivery and remedial actions with timeframes? If not, how will Parliament assess performance?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: As we discussed earlier in response to one of Ms Crozier's questions, there will be specific outcomes that are set to be achieved and there will be specific data points. I would think that certainly ministers would inherently want to ensure that they are meeting the plan that they have tabled in Parliament and which will then be measured against the outcome measures as to what they have achieved. I think any minister is going to inherently want to be able to show that they did what they said they were going to do to the Parliament and the community that ultimately holds them accountable.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Minister, just so I understand what you said just then, if they do not meet those outcome measures, they will be identifying the failures, right? And the reasons for non-delivery – is that all part of the data points they will be providing? It is not just saying they are meeting the outcome measures, it is also identifying if there are cases where they are not delivering or failing to meet those outcome measures. Did I understand that correctly?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: The data should speak for itself, Ms Gray-Barberio. There will be plans. There will be outcome measures. They will have to show how they have been met against the data. They must also include an assessment of the performance of actions specified against the applicable outcome measures. So the outcome measures will be there. They will include data points, and ministers will then show how they have achieved against those. If they have not achieved against those, then I would assume – well, not just assume; it would be self-explanatory, I would think, as is set out in 20D, that they would then account for it. If there is a difference between what they were reporting as having achieved versus the outcome measures they were expected to achieve, then I think any minister is going to want to explain what that difference is.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Just following up on Ms Crozier's question earlier about funding, how will improved coordination deliver early intervention of housing, disability, mental health and family violence services when they are so under-resourced?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: I refer you to my earlier answer. These plans may well inform investment decisions and opportunities, but many of those reform opportunities also do not necessarily need additional dollars. I again refer you to the example I gave earlier about priority for the cohort on the public housing list to ensure that family reunification is not in any way impeded by an inability to access public housing.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Can the government clarify what protections will operate in practice to ensure that families cannot be treated as noncompliant where the barrier is service availability rather than parental action?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: I feel like that is probably a question that is more relevant – if relevant – to the subsequent bill, not this bill. This is a framework designed for vulnerable cohorts, starting with those who are involved in our child protection system, and which over time can be expanded as we move from providing services to those that are in a relatively full system to, hopefully, having less people in the system and being able to invest in or direct service delivery more to early intervention. But this is not about child protection decisions as such in relation to family reunification or otherwise or court orders. It is about systemic reform. It is about how we ensure that the government is working in the best interests of vulnerable children and families. That might be more in line with the conversation that I suspect we will have on the subsequent bill.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: You have already spoken to the funding commitments. Does that also then extend to Aboriginal-led early intervention services?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Again I would refer you to my earlier answer. It is intended that plans may ultimately influence investment decisions, but actions under the plans do not necessarily in and of themselves require additional budget. I again refer you to the example I have given in relation to public housing.

David ETTERSHANK: Minister, could you explain why the bill does not mandate consultations with Aboriginal community controlled organisations (ACCOs) or community services in the preparation of SSSF plans?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Again I refer you to the answer I gave earlier in relation to the development of plans. Consultation will be in many respects something that ministers will do in the development of their plans as they go. In terms of coordination of that consultation, that will be through the children's services board. It is expected that there will be further consultation in the development of plans with a range of stakeholders, including Aboriginal stakeholders. There was certainly consultation with those stakeholders on the implementation of the bill during its development, and much of that spoke to that. Ultimately, it will be a decision for ministers as to what they put in their plans, how they then acquit those plans and how they respond in relation to the data.

David ETTERSHANK: Minister, I refer you to new section 20K. Could you just describe what consultation processes will operate under that provision to ensure that relevant Aboriginal community controlled organisations and the community and legal services supporting a family are meaningfully engaged specifically before an SSSF plan is prepared?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: I refer you to my earlier answer, but again I reiterate that this is systemwide reform as opposed to implementation at an individual family level.

David ETTERSHANK: Will the department be consulting with ACCOs and other community and legal sector services in the making of regulations and, if so, will the department be providing additional funding to these organisations to ensure their ability to participate actively?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Again I refer you to my earlier answer, Mr Ettershank.

David ETTERSHANK: I am sorry, did your earlier answer pick up the question of funding of those organisations?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Again I refer you to my earlier answer, which went to several earlier answers – one, that this bill is not about specific funding. There may be parts of it at a systemic or individual plan level that might influence funding decisions, and they will be matters dealt with through the budget in the usual way. I continue to refer you to my answer – that I have set out a number of times now the way in which collaboration will occur across government and the way in which stakeholder and lived-experience views can be incorporated.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: How does the government reconcile the bill's aspirational reference to the recognition principles with the absence of any mechanism to assess or enforce compliance?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: As I said in my summing-up regarding the recognition principles that were legislated – unanimously, I acknowledge, by this chamber a few years ago, and I in particular thank Dr Bach for his support on that at the time – the new section 20L(d)(i) ensures supporting stable and strong families partners have a responsibility in relation to Aboriginal persons:

> to have regard to and apply the recognition principles …

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: How will the government ensure in practice that SSSF partners demonstrate compliance with the recognition principles and also at the same time actively uphold Aboriginal children's rights to connection with family, community, culture, country and language?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: As I said, there is a specific legislative requirement to have regard to and apply the recognition principles, and the oversight and accountability mechanism is the Parliament itself. It will be up to people such as you, Ms Gray-Barberio, to ensure that that is done.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: What role will the First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria and the Aboriginal children's commissioner play in the development of SSSF plans and assessing whether obligations to Aboriginal children and families are being met?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: That will be a self-determined matter for the First Peoples' Assembly, for Gellung Warl.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Why does the department consider section 16, 'Responsibilities of the Secretary', and section 174, 'Secretary's duties in placing child', of the Children, Youth and Families Act inadequate? What gaps would this legislation be closing?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: It is about everyone's responsibilities, Ms Gray-Barberio.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Will the SSSF partners be working with any KPIs?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: I refer you to my earlier answers, Ms Gray-Barberio, but the outcome measures themselves will be the KPIs.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Will there be any lived-experience representatives on the Children's Services Coordination Board?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: I refer you to my earlier answer, Ms Gray-Barberio, and my answer to Ms Purcell as well.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: In relation to continuity and ensuring that all the ministers are required to provide SSSF plans and progress reports, how would the scheme hold them accountable, apart from the Parliament calling them out at the end? Are there safeguards or measures within the two-year period where they are required to provide progress reports, or are we expected in Parliament to call them out throughout that two-year process?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: I am torn between raising a point of order on repetition and referring Ms Gray-Barberio to my earlier answer. I have dealt with accountability and oversight a number of times now.

Clause agreed to; clauses 2 and 3 agreed to.

Clause 4 (16:32)

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: I move:

1. Clause 4, page 10, lines 9 to 13, omit all words and expressions on these lines and insert –

"SSSF Group, a SSSF partner must –

(i) make all efforts to demonstrate compliance with the recognition principles; and

(ii) actively enable the right of Aboriginal children to develop and maintain a connection with their family, community, culture, Country and language;".

I have already highlighted in my speech earlier what this amendment is speaking to. It is speaking to ensuring that compliance with the recognition principles in section 7E of the Children, Youth and Families Act is not implied but clearly embedded as an obligation. It is about strengthening the language in the bill beyond passive acknowledgement. It is also about ensuring that cultural safety and self-determination are central to the operation of the SSSF, rather than secondary considerations.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: The government will not be supporting this amendment. As I said in answering questions from Ms Gray-Barberio and in my summing-up remarks regarding the recognition principles that were legislated unanimously by this chamber a few years ago, new section 20I(d)(i) ensures supporting stable and strong families partners have a responsibility in relation to Aboriginal persons. They are required to have regard to and apply the recognition principles.

Georgie CROZIER: The coalition will not be supporting the Greens amendment.

Amendment negatived.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: I move:

2. Clause 4, page 13, before line 1, insert –

"(4) For the purposes of preparing a SSSF plan, a SSSF partner who is a Minister must consult the First Peoples' Assembly and the Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People, including in relation to how the First Peoples' Assembly and the Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People will assess the performance of actions of the SSSF partner under the SSSF plan in relation to Aboriginal children and families.".

3. Clause 4, page 13, line 1, omit "(4)" and insert "(5)".

Again, I have spoken to these amendments in my speech. The second amendment inserts a new subsection requiring that, when preparing a SSSF plan, a minister who is a SSSF partner must consult the First Peoples' Assembly and the commissioner for Aboriginal children and young people. This amendment is also about embedding Aboriginal-led oversight within the development of the SSSF plans, ensuring that performance measurement and evaluation are informed by the voices and institutions established to represent and safeguard Aboriginal children and communities.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: My advice is that the First Peoples' Assembly have indicated that they were not aware of nor had requested this amendment. As of 1 May 2026, obviously the current assembly will cease to exist and a new body Gellung Warl will be established under the Statewide Treaty Act 2025. New roles and responsibilities should not be conferred on Gellung Warl without Gellung Warl seeking or agreeing to these specific roles and responsibilities, indeed in this case before the body has even commenced. The Statewide Treaty Act provides appropriate processes for departments and ministers to engage Gellung Warl, so the government does not support this amendment.

Georgie CROZIER: The coalition will not be supporting this amendment.

David ETTERSHANK: Legalise Cannabis will be supporting this. We believe the consultation principles are really important, and we commend the Greens for these amendments.

Amendments negatived.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: I move:

4. Clause 4, page 16, line 28, omit "areas)." and insert "areas); and".
5. Clause 4, page 16, after line 28 insert –

> "(c) include assessments made by the First Peoples' Assembly and the Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People in relation to whether the SSSF partner is meeting their responsibilities to Aboriginal children and their families through the performance of actions under the SSSF plan.".

The third set of amendments I also spoke to in my speech. It is about requiring the reporting under the SSSF framework to include assessments made by the First Peoples' Assembly and the commissioner for Aboriginal children and young people regarding whether a SSSF partner is meeting their responsibilities to Aboriginal children and families. It is also about mandating the inclusion of these assessments and ensuring that the bill moves beyond internal self-reporting and incorporates independent Aboriginal oversight into performance reporting; therefore strengthening transparency and ensuring Parliament and the community can see whether commitments to Aboriginal children are being met in practice.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: The government will not be supporting these amendments. The Commission for Children and Young People, as we discussed when I was answering questions from Ms Crozier, remains an independent oversight body. The commission can of course recommend policy, program and funding reforms as part of the performance of its functions. It may be engaged as part of the design or implementation of specific initiatives. It would be highly unusual for an independent oversight body to have a formal role in being consulted about matters it could then be responsible for oversighting. Specifically in relation to the commissioner for Aboriginal children and young people, this is not a position that exists in legislation, and therefore it makes it difficult to refer to it in legislation. The government will not be supporting these amendments.

Georgie CROZIER: While I understand the intent of what Ms Gray-Barberio is trying to achieve, the coalition will not be supporting the Greens amendments either.

David ETTERSHANK: Legalise Cannabis will be supporting these amendments. We think that the process of rigorous assessment of the intent of the bill is really important, and that is how we ensure that it is effective legislation. We will be supporting Ms Gray-Barberio's amendments, and we commend them to the house.

Amendments negatived; clause agreed to; clauses 5 to 8 agreed to.

Reported to house without amendment.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (16:40): I move:

That the report be now adopted.

Motion agreed to.

Report adopted.

Third reading

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (16:40): I move:

> That the bill be now read a third time.

Motion agreed to.

Read third time.

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: Pursuant to standing order 14.28, the bill will be returned to the Assembly with a message informing them that the Council have agreed to the bill without amendment.

Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Stability) Bill 2025

Second reading

Debate resumed on motion of Lizzie Blandthorn:

> That the bill be now read a second time.

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (16:41): This is the second bill we are debating in the house today, the Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Stability) Bill 2025, which leads on from the bill we have just finished. I am not going to repeat a lot of what I said in the previous debate. I think I made my points very clearly in that debate around the issues that were highlighted many years ago through the Cummins inquiry. Without labouring the point too much, what this bill does is seek to amend the Children, Youth and Families Act 2005 to revise the legal framework governing children subject to protection orders, with the stated aim of maximising safe, timely and sustainable family reunification. It does a few things. Basically it is replacing the term 'permanency' with 'stability', and whilst that might not seem a lot to those that are not involved in the system, it actually does take away a lot of reform that was done in the past.

I will go back to the Cummins inquiry just very briefly, because the conclusion of the *Report of the Protecting Victoria's Vulnerable Children Inquiry* did highlight, as I said in my previous speech in the previous debate, around the system goals and the major system reforms – and we have been talking about the framework that will come into place given what has just passed the house – looking at:

> Reducing the impact of child abuse and neglect including addressing the immediate and long-term needs of the child …

I want to stress the 'long-term needs of the child': safety, health, developmental, education and for the child to be heard. And in the conclusion:

> The Report concludes that there has been a significant failure to recognise the crimes of child physical and sexual abuse.

I think that is important, because far too often there are crimes that are committed against children by those that are closest to them. It continues:

> The Report shows the way forward for this recognition, for holding perpetrators responsible, and for the protection of vulnerable children from these crimes.
>
> The 10 major system reforms … contain major changes to address the contributing factors to child abuse and neglect and the potential for increased prevention through effective, coordinated early interventions.

Again, that is the key – effective, coordinated early intervention. It goes on:

> This requires a whole-of-government strategic approach, driven at Cabinet level by government, supported by a strengthened Children's Services Coordination Board –

and we have basically just debated all of this, given what has just been passed –

> and overseen by a Commission for Children and Young People. The implementation of the Inquiry's recommendations requires many parts of Victorian Government, its departments and agencies, and government funded CSOs to work together and share responsibility to protect Victoria's vulnerable children.

I am putting that in at the start of this debate, given what we are about to debate now. I want to make the point again that out of that inquiry there was reform that was undertaken and it was for the best interests of the child. In the previous debate I spoke about some of the appalling situations that are occurring with children in state care – the exploding numbers and the vulnerabilities – so I am not sure that that 'effective, coordinated early intervention' that Cummins talked about has been undertaken for the past decade.

This bill replaces the term 'permanency' with 'stability', including a holistic definition of 'stability' to include legal, physical, cultural and relational stability. It changes the duration of the extension of a family reunification order when it is in a child's best interests by enabling courts to issue an initial FRO for up to 24 months, which is doubling the timeframe from what it was – 12 months – allowing courts to issue extensions for orders when it is in the best interests of the child for additional periods of 12 months, with no limitation on the number of extensions. That is the issue that was identified a decade ago, that there was really no stability. There was no permanency to the decisions; they were languishing there for years in courts and those court orders just went on and on. There was an attempt to try and address that, to give that permanency for the child. What the bill also does is repeal the cumulative 24-month limit on FROs, removing the requirement to move toward permanent care if reunification has not occurred within that timeframe and is unlikely to occur.

It also abolishes the need for compelling evidence that reunification is likely in order to be able to extend an FRO, and it removes adoption from the hierarchy of case-planning objectives – that is, adoption is to no longer be an option for children in child protection. I looked at that and thought that was a bit curious. We know that there are fabulous foster carers, and I have certainly spoken to foster carers in my time as shadow minister who were doing such great work with those children in a loving, stable environment, and they were wanting to adopt and give children that love, care, stability and permanency, but they were not able to for one reason or another, as deemed by government. I do think that is a fairly rigid aspect. I do appreciate the harms that have been done in the past by adoptions, but I could not imagine being in that position, so I am very sympathetic to both sides. It is very difficult, and I do not think there is any easy answer, but I do know that there are many very good people out there who want to provide support to vulnerable children. I had a conversation not long ago with a healthcare provider who I had no idea had taken care of a profoundly disabled child as a young baby, and that young man – well, he is not a young man anymore; he is in his 30s – has been with that family for all that time. It was just a wonderful story to hear about the care being undertaken. I digress a little bit, because I do want to put on record that I think it seems to be a little inflexible, given some of the issues and the risks to a child that we are trying to prevent here and the goodwill of so many people.

Another key reform of this bill includes the best interests test update, which basically updates the child's best interests test which magistrates use when creating care orders, to emphasise continuity and stability in care, including physical, cultural, relational and enduring stability. Permanency objectives replace 'permanency' with 'stability' in case-planning objectives, as I have mentioned. Adoption removal – I have just spoken about that. It removes adoption from the permanency hierarchy of case goals, implementing the recommendation from the 2021 inquiry into historical forced adoptions. Extension thresholds – the court must consider prior extensions, parental engagement and barriers to timely reunification. This bill mandates an independent review five years after full commencement, and transitional issues apply to amendments to ongoing proceedings, allowing immediate effect of new rules.

When this bill does come into effect it will give greater discretion to the courts in child protection cases – the discretion that was deliberately curtailed, if you like, in 2014. When the former coalition

government introduced reforms, it was to limit the Children's Court's powers to stop children languishing in care and to ensure timely, permanent decisions. I referred to that before; sometimes they were languishing in care for many years and there was no permanency to those orders. That reform was designed to give that child stability and permanency. This bill reverses that safeguard, and it hands back the discretion to allow those unlimited extensions. Whilst we all understand that nobody wants to remove a child from their family unnecessarily – and they really do not; I think we all agree that the last thing we want to do is have children in state care – if that child is at risk of physical, emotional and sexual abuse, and that is often, sadly, the reason why children are removed, then I hope this bill does actually get this right. I know it is not easy, and I know that it is complicated. No two cases are the same; it is very complicated. But what this bill will do, by giving courts the ability to grant unlimited extensions on FROs, is risk prioritising parental rights over the child's needs and their rights. Whilst I am a true believer in parental rights and parents having a say over their children, if it is a very dangerous, abusive environment where the child is not thriving, where the child is at risk or where the child is exposed to physical and psychological harm or exposed to things like parental drug use and abuse, I do have concerns around those needs and the risks for a child in that situation. It does risk, then, that child being kept in that cycle, if you like, through the child protection system and being in limbo and not having that permanency.

As I said, I have outlined some of the issues around why we are debating this bill, the history around it and what we were doing by putting reforms in place to try and give stability and permanency to children so that those decisions were made through the courts and they were not languishing from one order to the next. In saying that, I do understand that it is very difficult to manage these children, but what we do know about, as I previously highlighted, are the extraordinary numbers of child investigations. I think that is telling. I think that points to, as Cummins pointed out, why effective, coordinated and early interventions need to be in place. It is too late, given there are over 120,000-odd investigations taking place, with 11,000 children in the child protection system. These numbers have exploded, and these children are at risk. So there are concerns around how the government will monitor this, given those changes to the system, and how these numbers, hopefully, will come down and those children will be safe.

Whilst I do have concerns about the government's approach over the last decade, there are a lot of things that need to be done. We heard in the last debate that finally we will get the data and that will be reported on a regular basis. We need that data. We need to actually see how the system is tracking, and we need to understand whether these reforms will actually work. That data and having greater transparency and accountability are incredibly important, because I do not think we have had that to date. It has only been through the commissioner for children and young people speaking out and really talking about the extraordinary failures within the system and comments from others that have arisen that we have been exposed to the shocking statistics. Again I say that this is a complex area – it is not easy; I do appreciate that – but it is incredibly important that we do have the children's needs as the centrepiece in these very delicate and sensitive and often very troubling and awful situations that these children, through no fault of their own, are placed. With those words, I will not take too much time. I will have some questions in committee around the bill and what it is hoping to achieve, but I did want to make those few remarks and note that the coalition will not be opposing this bill.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO (Northern Metropolitan) (16:55): I rise to speak on the Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Stability) Bill 2025, following our debate on the Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Supporting Stable and Strong Families) Bill 2025. At the heart of this bill is a simple but deeply important objective: ensuring that children in our child protection system have safety, stability and certainty in their lives. I am sure everyone in this place agrees that this goal is non-negotiable. Every child deserves to be properly housed, cared for and protected from violence, abuse, neglect, harm and exploitation.

This bill comes after a number of significant amendments were made in 2014 to the Children, Youth and Families Act 2005 to protection and permanent care orders. Unfortunately, these amendments had

some unanticipated and concerning outcomes for children in out-of-home care. This bill is a good bill. It is a bill that seeks to rectify those consequences in line with recommendations from a number of reviews: the Commission for Children and Young People's *'…Safe and Wanted…'* report of 2017, the 2022 permanency longitudinal study and the Yoorrook Justice Commission's *Yoorrook for Justice* report. The bill makes a number of changes which the Greens have been calling for since the changes were implemented in 2014.

The Commission for Children and Young People's *'…Safe and Wanted…'* report of 2017 found that the very permanency reforms designed to protect children had instead created new barriers to family reunification. Parents under court orders to complete programs, treatments or assessments within rigid timeframes were not able to as the services simply were not available. The system was failing them, and reunification rates dropped. These rigid timelines also did not take into account individual circumstances and barriers, such as living with a disability or a mental health challenge, homelessness, family violence, incarceration, intergenerational trauma or poverty.

In 2022 the permanency longitudinal study found these 2014 permanency reforms did not make family reunification happen any faster. Instead some unintended consequences emerged. There were delays in cultural case planning, particularly for Aboriginal children, and more delays and legal disputes under care-by-secretary orders. Stakeholders have also raised concerns about whether the process felt fair for families trying to reunify. In some cases court processes may have actually prolonged uncertainty for children rather than reducing it.

Lastly, the Yoorrook Justice Commission's *Yoorrook for Justice* report, in recommendation 25, states:

> The Victorian Government must amend the *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005* (Vic) to allow the Children's Court of Victoria to extend the timeframe of a Family Reunification Order where it is in the child's best interest to do so.

One in every 11 Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander children in Victoria is living in out-of-home care, the highest rate of any state across Australia. I just have to say this again because it is quite massive: one in every 11 Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander children in Victoria is living in out-of-home care. In other words, Aboriginal children are over 10 times more likely to be removed than their non-Aboriginal counterparts. This is such an unacceptable reality that needs to be changed, and this is why the Greens are supporting this bill today and why we have put forward amendments to enable greater family reunification, which must always be the priority.

Children should not be living away from home. They should not be living away from country. They should not be living away from culture, from language and from their communities. This is such a profound loss to our society. Then if we flip the script for just a moment, if these were white Anglo children, I do not think we would accept this as normal or status quo. With Aboriginal children and families being so disproportionately over-represented in Victoria's child protection system, we need Aboriginal-led solutions. I would like to extend my thanks to the Victorian Aboriginal Child and Community Agency, Djirra, the Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service and the Federation of Community Legal Centres in Victoria for taking the time to share their position on the bill with me and my office. The Greens are deeply committed to continuing to work with First Nations stakeholders to ensure that First Nations voices are centred in any legislation that comes through this place.

For Aboriginal communities these rigid timeframes have been particularly harmful and have compounded harm. We have seen permanent care orders fail Aboriginal children, completely severing ties to family, community and culture and reproducing the same injustices that Yoorrook was established to uncover but also make recommendations to fix once and for all. Children succeed when families are supported with culturally safe, intensive and targeted interventions, rather than being removed permanently from their networks. While we welcome the bill's removal of strict 12-month time limits for family reunification, which better centres the best interests of the child, we still urge this Labor government to commit to all 100 final recommendations outlined by the Yoorrook justice

report. We need to close the gap, and implementing these important recommendations is an important step towards this.

The bill also removes adoption from the case-planning hierarchy. Adoption is seldom discussed as a pathway in child protection case planning. Legally severing ties to a child's birth, family and identity is lifelong and irreversible. For Aboriginal families, keeping adoption in the case-planning hierarchy risks repeating the historical scars of the stolen generations and undermines self-determination. This amendment is a step in the right direction.

The bill also puts forward an amendment to add 'stability' to the 'best interests of the child' principles. The Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Permanent Care and Other Matters) Act 2014 changed 'stability' to 'permanency' in the hopes of addressing long-term rather than immediate solutions. This time around, moving back to a model that prioritises stability, the definition has been extended to include legal stability, physical stability, cultural stability and relational stability.

I would also like to say thank you to the foster parents and children with lived experience in out-of-home care who reached out to my office with their concerns about the bill. Addressing child protection matters is complex and nuanced, and there is no one-size-fits-all approach. The Foster Care Association of Victoria shared how foster carers have concerns about the practical implementation of the bill. Foster carers are concerned that longer placements without clear timelines can increase emotional and financial stress, disrupt children's sense of belonging and heighten placement instability, particularly when carers are not provided with the resources, therapeutic support or respite needed to sustain them.

The Greens would like to see this bill go further, and by saying go further, following good-faith consultations with our stakeholders, we have some amendments that are intended to strengthen the outcomes of the bill in line with its objectives to ensure the wellbeing of all children is paramount. I ask that these amendments be now circulated. The Greens' first amendment is to allow the Children's Court to extend family reunification orders as it sees fit within the best interests of the child. This brings the legislation fully aligned with the Yoorrook Justice Commission's *Yoorrook for Justice* report, recommendation 25. If we do not fully implement recommendation 25, we risk greater instability for children in care and no improvement in family reunification. Supporting families to remain together safely must always be the priority.

Our second amendment is to instate the power of the court to make conditions on care-by-secretary orders, as the court previously had the power to do on custody-to-secretary orders. When the state assumes parental responsibility under a care-by-secretary order, the court should retain the ability to set enforceable conditions. Without that power, safeguards rely too heavily on departmental discretion.

Our third amendment removes the rule that limits parents to four visits a year when their child is under a permanent care order. Children have the right to stay in contact with their parents, siblings and extended family as long as it is safe. The law should not impose an arbitrary cap on that contact.

Our fourth amendment is to remove the review altogether. We have heard from stakeholders how difficult it has been to get to this point, to have meaningful, positive outcomes for children in care and their families. There is a risk that a review will repeal these positive steps forward and result in more children being removed from their families. Multiple reviews have been done over the years, and the message has been clear. The changes in this bill are long overdue and need to remain in place.

Our last and final amendment is to repeal section 276A of the principal act. We believe the repeal of section 276A would restore the courts' capacity to make decisions guided solely by section 10 best interest principles, ensuring that outcomes prioritise stability, family connection, cultural identity and relational continuity, particularly for Aboriginal children.

With this bill there is a real chance to improve family reunification to reduce harm and instability that children experience through the Children's Court and permanent care orders. The Greens say we

cannot wait for more children to be failed by the system. We have an opportunity right now to reverse the damaging errors made in the 2014 permanency reforms, and I urge members to take this opportunity seriously. I commend this bill to the house.

Sonja TERPSTRA (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:07): I rise to make a contribution on the Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Stability) Bill 2025. I am just going to quickly go through and summarise, in a nutshell, what this bill will do, but I will then get into a bit more detail as I go through some of the reforms. The bill will focus on increasing flexibility in timelines on family reunification orders by allowing the court to issue an initial order for up to 24 months in out-of-home care in most cases, followed by extensions of up to 12 months at a time, where it is in the child's best interest to do so. What we have heard from a number of speakers here is that one of the key focuses of the bill is to improve flexibility and enhance reunification orders where it is in the child's best interest to do so. It also removes adoption from the hierarchy of case plan objectives that can be pursued for a child or a young person, and it amends the term 'permanency' to 'stability' throughout the act, because a key point in this bill is to provide stability for the child.

Key objectives in the bill are to provide greater flexibility in timelines on family reunification orders to ensure parents and families have more time to make the changes required to achieve reunification; as I said earlier, replace terminology throughout the bill – 'permanency' to 'stability'; and remove adoption from the stability hierarchy. They are all worthy amendments in this bill.

A key point of this bill is also that the 2025–26 state budget invests $167.4 million over two years to continue early interventions to keep over 5900 families together and safe. This builds on the investment in the 2024–25 state budget, which provided $198 million over two years for critical earlier intervention, diversion and family preservation and reunification services, because, again, the focus is on keeping families together and providing stability and helping those families make the changes that they need to make.

The family services platform is made up of three funded streams segmented by level of need, intensity and anticipated cost of support as well as the primary system goal of connecting families, which is delivered to families with emerging needs and provides brief interventions where needed, delivered in groups if necessary, individually or combined. It also includes supported playgroups and early help family services, so again demonstrating that early intervention approach to try and keep families together. It also strengthens families by delivering to families with cumulative escalating needs. There is a monitoring of those needs, and responses are tailored to those needs as they emerge. It includes integrated family services, which provide in-home group and individual coaching where required. It is also about restoring families where they have significant or enduring needs. It offers comprehensive interdisciplinary in-home child and family support that is more targeted and intensive. It includes services for the family for family preservation and reunification, putting families first and rapid engagement and diversion cohorts. The early intervention and diversion services that make up the family services platform have demonstrated improved outcomes for families and children, which also include improved parenting, self-efficacy, family functioning and reductions in children entering care. You can see those are demonstrated outcomes as a result of this approach.

The Victorian government considers that timely delivery of services is critical to supporting families to reunify with their children and to supporting children and families involved in child protection more generally. That is why on 2 December 2025 the government introduced the Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Supporting Stable and Strong Families) Bill 2025, which will support cross-government collaboration to support improvements to the system; that is the bill we debated earlier.

The most recent Victorian child protection data in the 2026 report on government services shows that of the children who exited out-of-home care to a permanency outcome in 2023–24, sadly, 12.5 per cent returned to care within a 12-month period. This is the second-highest percentage across Australia, suggesting potential to improve that long-term stability of permanency outcomes in Victoria. This is

why we are acting on that. The return-to-care rate is calculated 12 months after a child or young person exits out-of-home care, and therefore the 2026 report reflects exits that occurred in 2023–24.

The bill also responds to recommendation 16 of the *Stronger Together* report, which is that Victorian legislation should be amended to allow extensions of family reunifications beyond 24 months when it is in the child's bests interest and when progress towards reunification has been delayed by exceptional circumstances. The increased time for initial family reunification orders and ability to extend orders will provide more time for child protection to work with families and affected family members when pursuing reunification. This will also help connect affected family members to appropriate recovery services and conduct risk assessments under the 'seek, analyse, formulate, enact, review' and multi-agency risk assessment and management frameworks when family and domestic violence has been identified as a proactive concern. The bill does not require there to be exceptional circumstances to extend a family reunification order beyond 24 months. This ensures that extensions can be granted wherever it is in the child's best interests to do so, so again it is a child-centred approach that puts the needs and the best interests of the child at the centre of all decision-making.

In terms of the *Yoorrook for Justice* report by the Yoorrook Justice Commission, this bill addresses recommendation 25 of the report, and this is in line with the commitment that the minister gave when she gave her evidence to the Yoorrook Justice Commission in May 2023. Recommendation 25 of that report recommends that the government should enable the Children's Court to extend the timeframes of family reunification orders where it is in the best interests of the child to do so. The bill therefore does fully implement recommendation 25 because it is providing the court with the ability to extend the timelines on family reunification orders, as I said, when it is in the child's best interests to do so. I just want to go into a little bit more detail about how these reunification orders will improve and offer more flexibility and stability. As I mentioned before, there will be orders that can cover for up to 24 months in out-of-home care initially, or in specific circumstances where a child has already spent more than or close to 24 months in temporary care, in which case it will be treated as if it was an extension to the family reunification order, and then up to a 12-month extension without limit on the number of extensions where it is in the child's best interests to do so.

Further, in determining whether an extension of the family reunification order is in the best interests, the court will be required to have regard to the following factors: any previous family reunification orders and the duration of each order; the extent to which a parent of the child has engaged with services and supports necessary for the safe reunification with the child, so the parent has to demonstrate their engagement and interaction with services to support the family staying together; and of course any circumstances that have impeded the progress of a parent's safe reunification with the child, including circumstances preventing timely access to services and supports necessary for reunification. Sometimes there might be matters that might be outside the person's control, but all of those things will require the court to take those matters into consideration. This will provide families with more time and more flexibility to receive the support they require to safely reunify, while continuing to ensure that the child's need for stability is a key consideration in decision-making. Additional considerations will also ensure the court considers and weighs these matters when determining the family reunification period and whether that should be extended or not. As with all child protection decisions, this will centre on the best interests of the child, which will prevent case drift resulting from extensions where reunification is unlikely and allow flexibility to account for factors outside the parent's control, as I just talked about.

Just touching on some of these issues again, in terms of the factors that the court must weigh against and in favour in extending, the principle is set out in the Children, Youth and Families Act 2005. For example, where parents have not been able to access services that would support reunification, this may support an application for an extension. So if, through no fault of their own, they have not been able to access services, the court can take that into account and weigh that appropriately. A significant duration or number of previous extensions will generally weigh against further extensions. I talked earlier about that case drift principle. Again, it is a positive factor that the court must consider and

weigh appropriately as well. Where parents have been offered services but have not engaged in these services without reasonable justification nor shown sustained change, this would generally weigh against an extension. Ultimately, it will be for the court to determine and weigh all of these factors as appropriate, in the best interests of the child and based on the unique circumstances of each case – looking at the child's circumstances and the parent's circumstances. The bill also simplifies case-planning decision-making so that the core consideration in setting up case-planning objectives must be in the best interests of the child and the stability hierarchy rather than timeframes of orders. A new monitoring framework has been implemented by the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing to provide system level oversight of stability and reunification orders, supporting early identification of issues ahead of the statutory review, which I believe will happen in about five years time.

Another aspect of this bill is to remove adoption from the permanency hierarchy. The presence of adoption in the case-planning stability hierarchy is inconsistent with Victorian policy that adoption should not be pursued for children in the child protection system. By removing adoption from the stability hierarchy the bill recognises the historical impact of forced adoption and the stolen generations. Removing adoption from the hierarchy is consistent with recommendation 56 of the 2021 parliamentary inquiry into responses to historical forced adoptions in Victoria. Removing adoption from the stability hierarchy in the Children, Youth and Families Act 2005 does not impact adoptions in a non–child protection context, which continue under the Adoption Act 1984 with the consent of parents. Removing adoption from the stability hierarchy will align Victorian legislation with longstanding practice, which is that adoption is not proactively pursued or recommended by child protection in Victoria. The government has committed to reconsidering connections between the Adoption Act 1984 and the Children, Youth and Families Act of 2005 to reinforce government policy that adoption is always inappropriate for children involved in child protection, and this may include amendments to section 173 of the Children, Youth and Families Act 2005, which is currently relied on by the Secretary of the Department of Justice and Community Safety to administer the adoption system in Victoria.

I just might quickly touch on one other aspect, which I have touched on briefly. I think I have got a minute and 20 seconds on the clock, so I will do this before the clock beats me. Another important feature, as I mentioned earlier, is the replacement of the term 'permanency' with 'stability'. Again, permanency has been interpreted as prioritising legal permanency over broader considerations such as cultural, relational and physical permanency for each child. Stakeholders have highlighted that permanency prioritises legal permanence over a broader understanding of permanence, is inconsistent with non-Western understandings of permanence and generates confusion regarding the distinction between a permanent care order and the concept of permanency. Permanency was seen to deprioritise having a safe and secure environment for a child and having a network of stable relationships and remaining connected to country, culture and family. The term 'stability' will be substituted in the act to make clear that decision-makers must consider stability as a holistic concept that includes multiple dimensions. These elements are to be applied concurrently and read together when making decisions in relation to a child. You can see there is a lot in this bill; there is a lot of really detailed work that has gone into this bill. I commend this bill to the house.

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (17:22): I am pleased to rise to make a contribution on the Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Stability) Bill 2025, noting it has been a day when I have been listening quite intently to debate on the previous bill in the same vein and with the same minister and listening to a very good contribution by Georgie Crozier, our shadow minister in this house responsible for children. There are words that we have heard all day – very important words, without a doubt. They are 'child centred', 'stability', 'care' and 'reunification'. There are many of those words that are very, very important, and they have an implication across the board. At the end of the day this is about the most vulnerable children in our state, who for many and varied reasons are not safe to be at home and need to be removed to a safer place.

The whole focus of this legislation, and I am sure all across the chamber agree, is that placing a child in their next home must put them in a safer space than their previous one, and until that previous one – potentially where the parent, the primary caregiver, lives – is at a point where they can be reunified and it is safe to go home, home is not the right place for them. There can be many intervals, many interventions and much recovery, but it has to be demonstrated that when they return to the parent it is safer than when that child left. I know that is a very obvious statement, but from my experience over the last 10 years many of the people that have entered my office and contacted me are grandparents that have been providing kinship care – looking after infants, small children and not-so-small children – while unfortunately the parent has been unable to care for them. Potentially sometimes they have been in an abusive relationship and abusing the children and sometimes they have been severely addicted to drugs and alcohol, and all the good wishes in the world and statements of 'I'm finished. I'm over it. I'm done. I've been in rehab and I'm out' should not convince the government to send that child back to that parent. I have had grandparents beside themselves with concern, very much concerned about the child's life. So it is really important that the minister and Parliament get the balance right, and there are varying degrees on what the right thing to do is. I know Ms Crozier has made a great investigation into previous reports, in terms of the Cummins report in 2012 and indeed other reports like that of the former commissioner for children and young people Liana Buchanan. There are startling findings – highly concerning – but also directional pivots and compelling arguments for what to do.

In some ways the Liberals and Nationals have decided to take a not-opposed position. We understand the bill's intent. The bill's intent is safer reunification and we all agree on that, but there are some buts around this bill as well. There are still many buts in terms of what is happening out there on the ground not only with kinship care but very much with foster care and the sense that many foster carers are also at their wits' end. I want to just delve into that in a little bit more detail. This bill changes and extends family reunification orders from 12 months to 24 and then permits an ongoing, unlimited 12-month extension. It repeals the previous cumulative 24-month cap and removes the compelling evidence test. It places permanency with stability. Again, these are words; they have legal meaning. We want care that nurtures safety for those children in the system, and we ultimately want to get them out of the system. The bill winds back some of those orders from 2014, when Ms Wooldridge was in and doing her finest work at the time and with the knowledge that was available as well.

Some of the concern we have had is certainly about the drift. We have heard many members talk about the risk of renewed drift, and that requires competency in the department. It requires transparency and it requires accountability, as well as making ready not only the people who are taking on the children but the reunification plans. To my mind we have shifted a little bit from child centred to parent centred. There have been examples – as I have said, really shocking examples – in my electorate where we have had a grandparent who has looked after twins. I am not going to name names or anything of that nature. But the compelling evidence that I heard time and time again was that somehow, at some stages, the department seems to take the view that the drug-affected parent has more rights than those little infants and the grandparents do not seem to have much right at all. Sometimes it takes huge intestinal fortitude for those grandparents to continue to work, continue to support, and they are nearly at their wits' end. They get into the court, and then the court basically, in this one particular case, said to the department, 'What are you doing? Why are you doing this to the grandparents? Why are you reunifying, and why aren't you overseeing that reunification properly and carefully?' Why are we siding with drug-affected parents? We all want those people to have good lives. It is crying shame and criminal that they are in that position, but ultimately the government, the minister, has a responsibility to those children and has a responsibility to work with carers. I think that is going to be the theme of some of the rest of my contribution.

We have a fantastic charity that the minister will know. I know the minister has met with the charity and the charity founder before: A Better Life for Foster Kids. They do an amazing job. They do care packs that they send out to the department as well. They do Christmas presents – thousands of them are wrapped. Now, you might say, 'This is a bit twee, Melina.' Well, it is actually about supporting

those people that support our most vulnerable children. Some of the content and comments that A Better Life for Foster Kids have sent to me and discussed with me in relation to this bill are such:

> Children's interests must remain paramount.

Unlimited extension risks returning to 'instability' and 'drift'. I am quoting Heather:

> Children cannot be expected to wait indefinitely for adults to become 'well enough' in a system where access to treatment, housing and support is currently measured in months or years …

Reunification needs services, not just time.

In terms of housing, family violence responses, alcohol and drug treatment as I have said, mental health, therapeutic parenting programs for the parents, culturally safe case management and practical mentoring are some of the critical issues. Some things are needed for carers – carers are central. They report financial strain, administrative burden, poor communication and limited therapeutic support for children. They end up with flat heads and poor pockets, belting their heads against a brick wall to try and get services and therapeutic support for children. They are, without doubt, the stability and backbone of this area. Indeed if you look at some of the numbers in the last report, the 2023–24 report – I cannot seem to find a later one, so I will happily be corrected if there is a later one out there – there was a net loss of 270 foster carers from the system in that year. We had more than 400 leave. There was an increase of 160 but a net loss of 267. That is a clear indicator to me, and it should be to government, that something is not working in this system. A bill that seeks to do good is fine, but actually getting down to the nub of why these people – good people – are leaving the system should also be central to government intervention and consideration and legislation and funding and commitment. They talk about financial stress, unrealistic expectations placed on them and poor communication from child protection, and that is something I have just raised. Again and again these kids come into the system, whether they are a month old, four years old or whatever, often in a highly traumatised state. So it is very important that those wraparound services – we hear that quite often, but they are hugely important – are available to these kids at a time before they reach their 18th birthday and have left the system.

In terms of some of the things that the bill should do, or a future bill should do, it should certainly mandate communication standards, it should increase transparency and it should ensure that carers do have a voice. Indeed they are seeking to have a voice tomorrow on the steps of Parliament. Foster carers and kinship carers are meeting on the steps of Parliament at 10 o'clock, 10:30, and I think many people have had an invite to come out and talk to them, so it might be a very good opportunity – I am sure the minister got an invite too – to be able to participate and really listen to what they are saying in this space. I think I have covered many of their issues, but again, without carer support, stability is highly unlikely. Without stability, kids suffer. We need carer support, we need stability and we need kids to flourish and not suffer.

One of the other things that I would just like to touch on in my brief time left is in relation to Aboriginal children in the out-of-home care sector. Indeed it is certainly true the 2025 Productivity Commission update on Closing the Gap showed a worsening rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in Victoria in the out-of-home care sector. The target is there. It is a challenging space in that the Closing the Gap targets have been around now for nearly 20 years. Any improvements that we are seeing are incremental, but unfortunately in Victoria there has been a walking-back. Again, we have heard from various members in here about the Yoorrook Justice Commission and their recommendation that this bill is looking to achieve. The focus has to be on improving the welfare outcomes and lives of those children in out-of-home care.

Liana Buchanan, the former commissioner, made some comments in relation to a Coroners Court of Victoria report into systemic child protection failures, relating to some deaths back in 2015 to 2017, that was released in January last year. She found certain things: there was inconsistent and inadequate assessment of risk, there was poor cultural planning and there were repeated placement moves. This

is one of those things that I have heard through my office and being contacted by Heather Baird. The movement of young children through the system has an incredibly adverse effect, and these failures certainly disproportionately affect Aboriginal children, who are likely to be moved, likely to face unstable care and likely to be exposed to risks when the system does not provide cultural safety and well-supported placements. She raises issues around the findings in some of the reports, which show poor risk assessment and a repeated pattern of child protection having been found in multiple inquiries to be overly optimistic about decisions. There are some beautiful examples that occur in kinship care when children are nurtured. We need to foster and facilitate how that can happen in a more opportune way but really still cast a very careful eye over protecting children in the system.

David ETTERSHANK (Western Metropolitan) (17:37): I rise to make a contribution to the Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Stability) Bill 2025. The bill acquits recommendation 25 of the *Yoorrook for Justice* report that the Children, Youth and Families Act 2005 be amended to allow the Children's Court of Victoria to extend the timeframe of a family reunification order where it is in the child's best interest to do so. Under the current legislation, parents are only given 12 or at most 24 months to have their children returned to their care. After this period they can be permanently removed. These family reunification orders were introduced in 2016 under the permanency reforms of the previous government. Prior to that time they did not exist. The Yoorrook hearings heard that having the strict timeframe of two years was not enough time for Aboriginal parents to fulfil the requirements imposed by the courts to get their kids back. The timeframe disproportionately impacts Aboriginal families, compounded by the inevitable delay in being able to access the necessary services and supports. The last thing we want is for more Aboriginal children to be taken from their families. We have heard many times in this place that these children are over 20 times more likely to be removed from their mothers than other children. This critical reform will go some way to addressing the significant over-representation of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care. The bill also removes adoption from the hierarchy of case-planning stability objectives and replaces the term 'permanency' with 'stability' throughout the act.

Legalise Cannabis Victoria will be supporting this bill. There are some amendments that the Greens will be moving to more fully acquit the Yoorrook recommendations, and we will also be supporting those. As I said, this bill rolls back some of the provisions enacted in 2014 through the Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Permanent Care and Other Matters) Act 2014. The amendments no doubt were made in good faith to address some of the failings of the child protection system, and indeed the provisions around addressing the cultural support needs of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care were welcomed. However, there were at the time concerns about the bill's lack of consultation and how it would affect Aboriginal families. Stakeholders, including the Law Institute of Victoria, the Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service, Djirra and others, predicted that the permanency reforms and the introduction of family reunification orders with fixed time limits would adversely impact Aboriginal families in particular and see more children permanently removed, a continuation of the failed colonial interventions. Stakeholders also pointed to the lack of commensurate funding for those foundational supports that would give Aboriginal families at least a fighting chance of meeting the rigid reunification conditions. A 2020 report by Victoria Legal Aid into the impacts of the permanency amendments found that:

> … the intention of the amendments – timely, safe, permanent homes for children who need state intervention and prompt support for families at risk – are not being achieved.

The status quo has not been working for quite a while.

I have raised in the house the issue of pre-birth child protection orders where the department can remove a newborn baby – they just turn up at the maternity ward and the mother has had no idea that her unborn child was under a protection order. She has not even been given the opportunity, much less the support, to address whatever issue is the subject of that order, so the child is removed. Currently, every day a child is out of parental care counts against the parent. These periods are counted cumulatively and retrospectively. If a parent has had a child out of their care for more than 24 months,

the Children's Court has no power to make an order for reunification. They could still return the child to parental care, but where a staged reunification is more appropriate, they are unable to do that. The Children's Court is denied the ability to consider, for instance, whether the lack of services – housing, alcohol and other drugs or family violence supports – has prevented a parent from meeting that 24-month deadline.

This is what that might look like in practice. Let us say that a mother had her child removed on 1 January 2023. The clock starts ticking. Twelve months later, in 2024, the child is made the subject of a family reunification order by the Children's Court, which will expire on 30 January 2025. The child is still out of family care when the matter comes before the Children's Court for the final contest in January 2025, so the child has been out of parental care for just over two years by then. The mother has been on the waiting list for housing for over 12 months, which was the biggest impediment to getting her child back, but by 2025 she is doing extremely well. She is engaging with a variety of services. She has been meeting the conditions for overnight stays – namely, that she continue her ongoing engagement with services – so she is ready to begin the gradual transition of having her child back in her care. But the department decide that the child is doing well in the care of the non-Aboriginal carers, and by now that 24-month timeframe for reunification has expired, so they seek a care-by-secretary order, which removes all parental and custody rights and confers them on the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (DFFH) to the exclusion of all other people and agencies. The Children's Court has no ability to extend the family reunification order and really has no choice but to grant that order.

Care-by-secretary orders are disastrous in operation for Aboriginal children as they usually mean a significant drop in contact arrangements. The DFFH will only permit contact four to 12 times per year under these orders, and that is simply not enough. The decision can only be challenged by a parent in VCAT, but there is no legal aid funding for such applications, and of course there is an extremely long wait period for VCAT review. We will be supporting the amendment to reinstate the power of the Children's Court to make conditions on care-by-secretary orders. Another amendment will remove the requirement for the Children's Court to consider the extent to which a parent of the child has engaged with services and supports necessary for the safe reunification with the child and other conditions. This will mean that any extension of the timeframe is based on the best interests of the child alone and not on some arbitrary timeline, bearing in mind once again the barriers to accessing services and housing particularly faced by Aboriginal parents. The bill returns authority to the Children's Court to make decisions based on the best interests of the child, and we commend the government for implementing the recommendation. That directive to make decisions based on the best interests of the child is key.

We have had several meetings with the minister's office. I do want to thank the minister, her office and Liam for the very thorough briefings and responses to our questions. We are satisfied with the process and consultation undertaken in developing this bill. Permanent removal must be a last resort and way, way down the hierarchy of options, and we need to get serious about resourcing services that support families to thrive.

I want to finish with a quote from Antoinette Braybrook, the CEO of Djirra, which is an Aboriginal-controlled organisation that provides culturally safe services, including legal advice and representation, to support Aboriginal women who experience family violence:

> Arbitrary reunification deadlines are cruel and punitive. Ignoring the reality of Aboriginal women surviving violence, homelessness and systemic racism is itself a form of systemic violence. Healing cannot happen on a government stopwatch.

We hope this bill results in a decrease in children being removed from their families and more practical and timely support for parents to allow them to resume permanent care of their child as soon as possible. The removal of a child should always, always be the last resort. Families need support, not punishment. I commend the bill to the house.

Jacinta ERMACORA (Western Victoria) incorporated the following:

I am happy to speak in support of the Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Stability) Bill 2025.

The reforms in this Bill will enable the child protection system to better support children and families to be together, whenever it is safe to do so.

It aims to promote the best interests of the child by maximising opportunities for reunification.

This Bill sits alongside the Supporting Stable and Strong Families Bill, which we have just considered.

As we've discussed, that Bill is focused on supporting children, young people and parents on Family Reunification or Family Preservation Orders.

It does so by enhancing early intervention, improving support services for at-risk children and their families, and supporting family reunification.

The Bill before us today complements those reforms.

It acquits Recommendation 25 of the Yoorrook for Justice report.

That report states that:

- *Yoorrook considers that an appropriate balance can be achieved by reinstating the power of the Children's Court to override reunification time limits where necessary. This should support appropriate consideration of children's rights, including their best interests, without undermining the policy aims of the reforms.*

This Bill is consistent with the balance recommended by Yoorrook, as it enables the Court to extend the time provided to pursue family reunification for as long as it remains in the child's best interests.

The Bill introduces three main reforms:

- It extends the time available to parents to reunify with their children who are subject to a Family Reunification Order.
- It removes adoption as an option in case plans for a child or young person,
- It amends the term 'permanency' to 'stability' and provides greater detail on the meaning of the term 'stability'.

Extending reunification timelines

This Bill allows the Children's Court, in most cases, to issue an Order for up to 24 months in out-of-home care.

This may be followed by extensions of up to 12 months at a time when it is in the best interest of the child.

Presently, the Court only has the power to order out-of-home care for up to 24 months, after which it must consider permanent or long-term care.

The data shows that many families require more than 12 months of support and, in most cases, the extension of that period is granted. Most families are reunified within 24 months, and some require additional time and support to be able to achieve reunification.

We heard that returning to court frequently during the reunification process can jeopardise progress.

Providing for 24-month orders from the outset will align the legislation with current practice and reduce the number of court events for children and families.

In our consultation we also heard that the current rigid timelines did not provide sufficient flexibility to take account of complex family dynamics or factors outside of parents' control.

This Bill will provide families with more time and flexibility to receive the support they require to safely reunify, while continuing to ensure that a child's need for stability is a key consideration in decision making.

As with all child protection decisions, the Court's decision will centre on the best interests of the child.

This prevent case drift resulting from extensions where reunification is unlikely, and allow flexibility to account of factors outside of the parents' control.

Factors the Court will consider must include:

- Whether parents have been able to access services that would support reunification
- The duration of care and number of previous extensions
- If parents have not engaged in services without a reasonable justification, or not shown sustained change.

The requirement to show compelling evidence that the parent will be able to safely resume care of the child within the period of the Order will be removed.

This focuses the Court's consideration on the child's best interests.

Ultimately it will be for the Court to determine what is appropriate and in the best interests for each child, based on the unique circumstances of each case.

This will provide families with more time and flexibility to receive the support required to reunify, while continuing to ensure that a child's need for stability is a key consideration in decision making.

The Bill also simplifies case planning decision making, so that the core considerations in setting a case planning objective are the best interests of the child and the stability hierarchy, rather than the timeframes of orders.

Removing adoption

Adoption will no longer be an option in child protection cases. This brings the legislation into line with existing government policy.

The voluntary nature of adoption is not compatible with the purpose and nature of intervention in a child protection context.

Removing it as an adoption also recognises the historic impact of forced adoption and the Stolen Generation.

If a parent does not wish to pursue reunification, permanent or long-term care can still be considered from the outset.

Changing 'permanency' to 'stability'

The term 'permanency' will be amended to 'stability' throughout the Children, Youth and Families Act 2005.

'Permanency' has been interpreted to prioritise legal permanency and 'permanent care orders' over broader considerations, such as cultural, relational and physical permanency.

As a result, permanency was seen to deprioritise having a safe and secure environment, having a network of stable relationships, and remaining connected to Country, culture and family.

The term 'stability' better reflects the multiple elements that contribute to safe, stable and secure lives for children.

Five year review

An independent statutory review will be undertaken following five years of operation of the Bill.

Consultation and feedback

This Bill is a result of extensive consultation, including feedback from the Commissioner for Children and Young People, Community Service Organisations, carer peak bodies and Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations.

I want to take this opportunity to thank all of the people who have helped to shape and guide these reforms.

The people who do the hard yards of working to protect our children are doing the most important work we can imagine.

To the carers who support vulnerable children and young people, thank you for everything that you do.

Conclusion

This Bill is an important step in responding to the evidence and feedback on the operation of child protection in Victoria.

It will give the Children's Court the flexibility to provide families with more time to make the changes needed for their children to return home, when it's safe and in the child's best interests.

Every child deserves a safe and stable home – and every family deserves the chance to come back together when it's safe. These reforms make that possible, giving children the stability and connection they need to thrive.

I commend this Bill to the Council.

John BERGER (Southern Metropolitan) incorporated the following:

President, I rise to make a contribution on the Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Stability) Bill 2025.

In doing so I would like to first thank my friends the Deputy Premier Ben Carroll as the Minister for Education, and the Minister for Children, Minister Lizzie Blandthorn.

President, the Children, Youth and Families amendment moves to make changes to the principal act from 2005 to better support children and families and helping to keep them together whenever it is safe to do so.

The Amendment Bill incorporates significant reforms that are designed to promote the best interests of the child.

It will move to maximise opportunities for safe, timely, and sustainable reunification of children and families.

It is a very moving and important personal moment in a family, and it is important that it is done with the respect and timeliness necessary.

The main purpose of the Bill is to amend the Children, Youth and Families Act 2005 to revise the permanency settings including by removing adoption from the hierarchy of case planning objectives.

Providing the Children's Court with greater discretion and flexibility in relation to the duration of family reunification orders.

And changing legislative terminology to refer to and require consideration of stability in the best interests principles.

President, our system is designed to put the safety and wellbeing of the child first and foremost.

And the Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Permanent Care and Other Matters) Act 2014 (the Permanency Amendments) was brought in to ensure that children in out-of-home care can have certainty in their care arrangements at the earliest stage.

Out-of-home care can take several forms, including foster care, kinship care, permanent care, and residential care.

These children and young people might stay in these care arrangements for just a few days, or they can be in out-of-home care for several years.

President, in 2022, it was recorded that approximately 10,300 children and young people were living in out-of-home care at any one time, with 2,000 of those in the age range of newborn to five years old.

Stability as a principle remains critical in our legislative and systemic processes, because instability in care arrangements can have highly detrimental effects on a child's wellbeing.

Children and young people coming into out of home care often come with preexisting circumstances, including significant behavioral, emotional, medical and physical needs, or history of abuse, neglect and disadvantages.

And providing these children and young people with stable, long-term care arrangements is paramount to ensuring the best possible outcomes for their future.

But as key to outcomes in child wellbeing as stability is, the goal of reunification remains equally so.

And these Permanency Amendments have led to concerns of disadvantaging families seeking reunification.

Especially Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, where these children are overrepresented in the Victoria out-of-home care system at a rate 20.6 times higher than that of non-Aboriginal children in the 2023–24 period.

In simpler, and yet staggering terms, that totals 90.5 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children being placed in out-of-home care out of every 1000 in Victoria.

And so these amendments need to be reviewed for their effectiveness, and we have taken into consideration several reviews conducted.

Including the 2017 Safe and Wanted report released by the Commission for Children and Young People, which found that there are barriers such as availability of services to reunification and that reunification rates had declined since the Permanency Amendments.

The 2022 Permanency Longitudinal Study, which highlighted unanticipated results and recommended further monitoring to ensure improved long-term outcomes for children.

The 2021 Legal and Social Issues Committee's Inquiry into responses to historical forced adoption in Victoria, who recommended that adoption be removed from the permanency hierarchy and use of adoption on child protection grounds be restricted as far as possible.

And the 2023 Yoorrook for Justice report, which recommended that reunification timeframes be extended where it is in the child's best interests to do so on the basis that current statutory timeframes had and are negatively impacting Aboriginal and other families.

These reports further addressed the concern of adoption as a case planning goal within the Permanency Amendments.

In that with how adoption permanently severs a child's legal relationship with their parents, and often their family and cultural communities, it should never be considered a goal within case planning.

Both in Victoria and Australia-wide, there have been long-lasting ramifications from adoption processes.

Most notably, through the historical injustices experienced by the Stolen Generations and the Forgotten Australians.

Safe and Wanted found that the presence of adoption in the permanency hierarchy was a cause for community concern.

And the 2021 Legal and Social Issues Committee's Inquiry into responses to historical forced adoption in Victoria recommended that adoption be removed from the permanency hierarchy and use of adoption on child protection grounds be restricted as far as possible.

The Allan Labor Government is responding to reviews and recommendations through these reports by bringing in amendments to legislation that would achieve three key principles.

To provide the Children's Court with discretion and flexibility when making Family Reunification Orders, to provide families with additional time to work towards reunification, where this is in the child's best interests.

To remove adoption from the hierarchy of permanency objectives.

And to substitute the term 'permanency' with 'stability' to strengthen the understanding of stability by the inclusion of key elements to consider in determining the best interests of the child.

Furthermore, this bill seeks to remove the strict time limits that families seeking reunification are subject to.

While current legislation stipulates that Family Reunification Orders can only apply for a maximum period of 24 months, with an initial period of up to 12 months and a single extension of up to 12 months available.

These amendments will prioritise the child's best interests, which in many cases is ultimately with the goal of reunification.

By allowing the Court to issue an initial Family Reunification Order for up to 24 months since the child entered out-of-home care in most cases or up to 12 months where the child has already spent more than 12 months in temporary care under interim orders.

As well as granting the Court the power to issue extensions for these orders, when it is in the child's best interests, for additional periods of up to 12 months, with no limitation on the number of extensions.

With required consideration to any previous extension of the Family Reunification Order and the duration of each extension.

The extent to which a parent of the child has engaged with services and supports necessary for the safe reunification with the child

And any circumstances that have impeded the progress of a parent's safe reunification with the child including circumstances preventing timely access to services and supports necessary for reunification.

The latter is a critical consideration in these legislative changes, as there are numerous factors which can impact a parent's ability to achieve reunification with their children.

And prior strict time limits have disproportionately affected families from marginalised communities, particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.

These changes balance our Government's commitment to promoting reunification in families while ensuring that parents and caregivers can benefit from meaningful supports without a strict time limit.

Ensuring that no compromisation on the safety and wellbeing of the child occurs as a consequence, nor the loss of opportunity to achieve these outcomes.

With oversight from the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing through the implementation of a new systemic monitoring framework on efforts towards family reunification.

With focus on planning, decision-making and reunification timeframes through these new legislative amendments.

The removal of adoption from the stability hierarchy is a direct response to recommendations from various reports, stakeholders and communities.

Critically, the Parliamentary Committee Inquiry into responses to historical forced adoptions in Victoria 2021 report.

In 2024, the Premier made a historical formal apology to Victorians who experienced historical abuse and neglect as children in institutional care.

With an estimated over 90,000 children placed in care in Victoria prior to 1990, too many of which experienced physical, psychological, emotional and child sexual abuse.

These legislative changes simply bring our laws into line with long-standing Victorian policy that adoption is not considered a viable or pursued solution in child protection.

And in line with these changes, the Allan Labor Government intends to engage in further work to reinforce this in both the Adoption Act and the Children, Youth and Families Act.

Furthermore, consideration has been given into the use of "permanency" as terminology through the Act.

And how this has influenced decision-making into care arrangements through lessened focus on those external or consequential factors which support stability and security for children.

Over procedural final care arrangements in child protection, relating to Family Reunification Order timeframes and other requirements within the current legislation.

To demonstrate a more holistic approach that considers these factors, this bill will make changes to the 'best interests principles' value.

Requiring associated decision-making bodies to now consider.

The legal arrangements needed to ensure a child's parent or direct caregiver has a lasting and legally secure relationship with the child, which is also known as 'legal stability'.

Physical stability, to reflect the desirability of stable living arrangements, which support a child's connection to their community.

Cultural stability, to reflect the desirability of the child maintaining an ongoing connection to, and understanding and learning of, culture, family, tradition, language, religion, beliefs, values and stories.

And relational stability, to reflect the desirability of the child's positive, loving, trusting and nurturing relationships and emotional connection with significant others, such as parents, siblings, friends, family and carers.

Under former standards of practice, it is unfortunately the case that one form of stability could be prioritised to the detriment of others.

And through these amendments, all will now have to be considered to ensure that children receive the highest levels of stability, support, and outcomes.

These amendments are important because child protection, care arrangements, and family reunification are all matters of human rights.

It provides children with stability and certainty, so that the processes and procedures involved in establishing care arrangements do not cause further harm to a child's wellbeing.

It approaches the concept of stability in a holistic manner, taking into account the legal, physical, cultural and relational needs of the child.

And ultimately, it puts family reunification at the highest of priorities, making it so that families undergoing hardship and barriers to procedural requirements in the present do not lose the opportunity for reunification in the future.

Which particularly impacts families from marginalised backgrounds, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.

The Allan Labor Government is committed to supporting these communities.

With the Department of Family, Fairness and Housing funding an initiative delivered by the Victorian Aboriginal Child and Community Agency to promote family reunification in Victorian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities.

The Aboriginal Family Preservation and Reunification Response, providing families with intensive, in-home support tapering off, a culturally safe and holistic practice approach, funding for support including material aid, and health, counselling, and drug and alcohol support.

The Department has been working with Victorian Aboriginal Controlled Community Organisations since 2020 to deliver the Family Preservation and Reunification Response.

To keep children safely at home, to prevent children and young people entering care services, and to support children and young people currently in care to safely reunify with their family.

In 2021, the then-Andrews Labor Government committed $2 million dollars into early intervention programs to support families staying together such as community service organisation OzChild.

> Which was part of a $1.2 billion package for the children and families system in the 2021–22 budget, and $1 billion in last year's Budget to provide increased support for at-risk children, their families and carers.
>
> The 2020/21 Victorian State Budget invested $64.7 million in making the Home Stretch program universal, extending support for children and young people in out-of-home care from up to eighteen years of age to twenty-one.
>
> Providing an accommodation allowance for young people to remain with their foster carer or kinship carer after they turn eighteen, or to facilitate a transition to supported independent living arrangements.
>
> And this landmark initiative commenced in January 2021.
>
> This was alongside a $10.3 million dollar investment into the Better Futures Program, providing children and young people in out-of-home care with tailored support between 16 – 21 years old, including education and employment advice, and life-skills coaching.
>
> This support is crucial for young people transitioning to independent living, as it was reported in the Commission for Children and Young People 2019 Keep Caring Systemic inquiry, that 30% of care experienced young people ended up homeless in the first 3 years of leaving out-of-home care.
>
> The lack of stability children and young people are facing in out-of-home care has resulted in many struggling to stay engaged at school or accessing higher education.
>
> Raising Expectations is a government funded program that supports children and young people aged 15 years old and over. First established in 2015, the program has supported many care experienced children and young people across Victoria and has supported them to achieve their educational goals.
>
> It's clear that there is support for children and young people, however it's important for them to have stability in a family and home setting. By making these changes to the amendment, we can support children and young people being able to thrive, not just survive.
>
> And that is why I am proud to be supporting this Bill today, and I thank the Deputy Premier for bringing these amendments to Parliament.
>
> As well as many key organisations and stakeholders who contributed their insights to allow our Government to make these critical changes.
>
> Including the Commission for Children and Young People, the Yoorrook Justice Commission, and all the government departments, committees, and research groups who conducted inquiries and published these reports.
>
> The safety and well-being of all Victorian children and young people is paramount, and these amendments will help us to make sure that children and young people in out of home care do not fall through the cracks.
>
> And that they have a strong foundation for their future, like many of their peers.
>
> I commend this Bill to the house.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (17:47): Today we are enacting two significant pieces of child protection legislative reform. Earlier today we passed the supporting stable and strong families scheme, an internationally leading whole-of-government framework to improve outcomes for children, young people and their families, and now we are enacting recommendation 25 of the *Yoorrook for Justice* report through this Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Stability) Bill 2025.

This reform is long overdue. I have held consistent concerns for these provisions since their inception in early 2015. I have been on the record on these issues since early 2015. Fundamentally, I believe that every child, as long as it is safe, should be with their parents and every child has the right to know their identity. When the incoming Labor government came to power, I made the following comments in the other place on an amendment bill to these provisions:

> The 2014 amendments did not strike the right balance between the desirability for continuity and permanency in the life of the child and the extent to which the child and/or his or her parents can enjoy the protections they have under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

We need to be very careful about what we do in the name of child protection. It is very important to reconsider the hierarchy of the permanency objectives and where we place adoption in that hierarchy of objectives.

In the years that have followed we have seen the impact of these provisions on families. At the Yoorrook Justice Commission we heard of the disproportionate impact the permanency provisions have had on Victoria's First Peoples. As part of my evidence to the commission, I outlined that the provisions have been a blunt instrument. *Yoorrook for Justice* stated on page 225 of their report that in relation to permanency amendments balance must be restored. They also stated on page 226:

> Yoorrook considers that an appropriate balance can be achieved by reinstating the power of the Children's Court to override reunification time limits where necessary. This should support appropriate consideration of children's rights, including their best interests, without undermining the policy aims of the reforms.

Today, in line with their recommendation, we restore that balance for children and families. The bill will allow for flexibility in timelines on family reunification orders by allowing the court to issue an initial order for up to 24 months in out-of-home care in most cases, followed by extensions of up to 12 months at a time when it is in the child's best interests. The bill is consistent with the balance recommended by Yoorrook as it enables the court to extend the time provided to pursue family reunification for as long as it remains in the child's best interests. In determining whether an extension is in the child's best interests, the court will have regard to any previous extension of the family reunification order and the duration of each extension, the extent to which a parent of the child has engaged with services and supports necessary for the safe reunification with the child and any circumstances that have impeded the progress of the parent's safe reunification with the child, including circumstances preventing timely access to services and supports necessary for reunification. This reflects the court's important independent oversight role in child protection matters and limits the risk of case drift by requiring periodic judicial consideration and decision-making in each case.

Through the bill we have just debated earlier today, children, young people and their parents on family reunification or family preservation orders will be an initial focus of the supporting stable and strong families scheme. This supports my evidence at the Yoorrook Justice Commission, through questioning of counsel assisting, raising the importance of recognising that as well as more time, many families require more assistance to meet the requirements of reunification. At the time I stated in my evidence:

> … the two go hand in hand. And as some people may not be able to get access to services until further on, so it's also about when people can access services, as well as the time taken to get the support that they need to be able to be reunified.

I am proud to stand in this place and say that through this package of reforms I am acquitting my evidence to the commission in this regard. By replacing the term 'permanency' with 'stability', we are addressing concerns raised by stakeholders by now referring to the concept of stability, which includes consideration of legal permanency. This approach will prioritise continuity of the child's care, including stable and enduring arrangements for care and parental responsibility, whilst also providing flexibility for consideration of physical, cultural and relational stability.

I take this opportunity to thank stakeholders for their feedback on these reforms since the start of the consultation on these policy settings in 2023 and continuing through to the bill's introduction into Parliament. A few people in this place have referred to the comments – and indeed Mr Ettershank and Ms Gray-Barberio referenced the comments earlier – from Djirra. I just want to quote from their press release. I note Mr Ettershank also just quoted Antoinette Braybrook, the CEO of Djirra, who said:

> The over-representation of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care is not a failure of the system. It is the system operating exactly as it was designed to operate. The child protection system continues to expand while Aboriginal women are left grieving the permanent loss of their children, a separation driven by government and backed by legislation.
>
> The Stability Bill must be passed to stop embedding permanent separation into law and to ensure Aboriginal children are not denied the right to grow up safe and thriving with their mothers.

As I did in the previous bill, I also want to particularly acknowledge Anne McLeish of Kinship Carers Victoria. I note that Ms Bath spoke of the importance of kinship carers in our system, and indeed it is

unique that in Victoria so many children are cared for by the kinship system. But I would quote from their release, which says:

> For a decade now, Kinship Carers Victoria (KCV) has lamented the fact that the scope of work of the courts in preservation of families and supporting reunification was narrowed in 2016. At that time KCV questioned the purpose of the Government in doing so. In the 1980s Victorian led the world in the way that it enabled the courts to ask a wide range of questions about the circumstances leading to a child being removed from parents, including what bureaucracies had done, or not done, to prevent this. KCV wanted this scope of work restored to the courts; it appears that it has been done!

They also said:

> The focus on stability rather than permanency in the amendments is as it should be. It forces the discourse to be about stability across all forms of out-of-home care, instead of equating stability with a permanent placement. This will liberate our thinking and usher in an era of more responsive solutions about how we support all families in protection situations.

And they said:

> We commend these amendments to the wider community and urge all parliamentarians to vote for them. This is an opportunity for parliamentarians to act as one in protecting Victoria's children.

I thank all of those stakeholders who have taken the time to contribute to this work. As I said earlier, the list is exhaustive and there are too many to call all of them out, but I appreciate the time they have taken to contribute to the process.

In relation to adoption, the bill removes adoption from the hierarchy of case plan objectives that can be pursued for a child or young person in the child protection system. This is important. Child protection is a coercive environment, and adoption should not be a feature of any coercive environment. This acquits recommendation 56 of this Parliament's inquiry into responses to historical forced adoption in Victoria also, recognising the significance and impact of forced adoption and the stolen generation.

Lastly, I want to again thank Mrs Werner and her team, as well as other members across this Parliament and the crossbench, for the way in which they have, as with the Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Supporting Stable and Strong Families) Bill 2025, worked with us in the development and consideration of this bill. I want to thank the chamber; these types of improvements to the child protection and family services system can only be made when there is a bipartisan approach, as it ensures we have lasting improvements to the system as a whole. I thank those opposite and around us for working with us constructively to that end, and I commend the bill to the house.

Motion agreed to.

Read second time.

Committed.

Committee

Clause 1 (17:57)

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Minister, how will the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing implement the new monitoring framework to provide the system level oversight of efforts towards family reunification?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: At an individual level there is oversight in a number of different ways, including from case management at an individual level to court oversight – again at an individual level but also in a more systemic way.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: I move:

1. Clause 1, lines 5 to 6, omit "and the extension of that order".

I have already spoken at length during my speech on this amendment. This amendment is putting forward consequential amendments to clause 1 and insertions at clause 10 and clause 14 to remove statutory time limits for the family reunification orders to enable the court to determine any period it considers in the best interests of the child. This amendment is also about giving the courts flexibility to extend orders based on the child's needs and family circumstances rather than arbitrary deadlines.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: The government will not be supporting this amendment. The best interests of a child may obviously change over time and must be periodically reviewed by the court. Where there will be time limits on individual orders, the court will have the flexibility to make orders enabling family reunification to be pursued for as long as that remains in the best interests of the child.

Georgie CROZIER: The Liberals and Nationals will not be supporting the Greens amendment.

David ETTERSHANK: I think I addressed this question in my speech before. We believe this is a really important amendment and we commend the amendment to the house. We will be supporting it.

Amendment negatived.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: I move:

2. Clause 1, after line 6 insert –

"(ab) to enable permanent care orders to provide for contact with a child's parent more than 4 times a year if it is in the best interests of the child; and

(ac) to enable the variation of care by Secretary orders and the conditions of those orders; and".

Once again, this was spoken to at length during my contribution. This amendment makes changes to clause 1 to enable the variation of care-by-secretary orders and the conditions of those orders, giving the court, carers and families flexibility to respond to changes in the child's circumstances.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: The government will not be supporting this amendment. Care-by-secretary orders transfer parental responsibility for a child to the Secretary of the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing. These orders do not include conditions, reflecting that the secretary of DFFH is responsible for the long-term care and case planning of the child in accordance with the legal requirements in the act. This is a longstanding position in Victoria that applied to equivalent orders prior to the 2014 permanency reforms. Permitting the court to impose conditions on these orders would impair child protection's ability to respond quickly and effectively to the changing needs and circumstances of children and young people. It would also necessitate additional court events where conditions need to be changed or removed, adding significantly to the workload of the Children's Court and the potential trauma experienced by children and families involved in these processes. This would be a significant and untested change affecting thousands of at-risk children, parents and carers. It would be inappropriate to implement a change of this magnitude without careful consideration and would require significant stakeholder consultation, including with the Children's Court, peak bodies representing carers, and people with lived experience.

The act has always included a distinction between orders which grant the secretary partial parental responsibility, on which the court can impose conditions, and orders which grant the secretary sole parental responsibility, on which the court cannot impose conditions. Prior to the permanency amendments, guardianship-to-secretary orders similarly acted to transfer parental responsibility to the secretary and could not include conditions. Allowing the court to impose conditions on care-by-secretary orders would represent a significant shift in this longstanding legal framework, creating a new limitation on the secretary's exercise of their parental responsibility. The proposal to allow the Children's Court to place conditions on care-by-secretary orders has not been subject to consultation. Agreeing to this amendment would result in untested impacts on at-risk children and carers without consultation with the peak bodies representing carers and people with lived experience. The subject matter of such conditions typically forms part of case planning, and case-planning decisions by secretary are reviewable through internal review, under section 331, by the Victorian Civil and

Administrative Tribunal. Under section 333, this means that a child or parent can seek a review of the secretary's decisions without the need for court-imposed conditions.

Georgie CROZIER: As the government is not supporting these amendments, the Liberals and Nationals will also not be supporting the Greens amendment.

David ETTERSHANK: Legalise Cannabis will be supporting this amendment.

Amendment negatived; clause agreed to; clauses 2 and 3 agreed to.

Clause 4 (18:03)

Georgie CROZIER: Minister, clause 4 is looking at updating the child's best interest test which magistrates use when creating care orders to emphasise continuity and stability in care, including physical, cultural, relational and enduring stability, and you did mention this in your summing-up. Could you just confirm that the goal of achieving stable parental responsibility is strictly conditional on it being in the best interests of the child? I think you sort of reaffirmed that in your summing-up, but would you mind reaffirming that to the committee?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Yes, absolutely. The best interest of the child is the paramount consideration.

Georgie CROZIER: Thank you for the clarification. So if maintaining or restoring parental responsibility conflicts with the child's paramount need for safe, stable and ongoing care, does the government agree that maintaining that parental responsibility is not desirable?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: That would be a decision for the courts. It remains open to the courts to make that decision.

Georgie CROZIER: For the Children's Court's guidance, if they are applying this new holistic definition of 'stability' under this clause, can you confirm that the bill does not treat parental responsibility as an inherent or absolute right of the parent but rather as a responsibility that only comes second to, and must completely give way to, the paramount protection and best interests of the vulnerable child?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: The paramount consideration, the best interests, is absolutely that of the child above all else.

Georgie CROZIER: What specific elements and parameters will be used to measure cultural stability and relational stability for children in care? Will those elements be clearly defined or left to interpretation of the courts?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: The test would be applied by the courts, and it would be for the courts to determine what was in the best interests of the child. I cannot deal in hypothetical situations. It would be different on each and every occasion, because each and every child and their circumstances and their family circumstances are different. The explanatory memorandum spoke to this, but ultimately the best interests of the child is the paramount consideration. I will leave it at that.

Georgie CROZIER: The explanatory memorandum does say:

> physical stability reflects the desirability of stable living arrangements, which support a child's connection to their community;
>
> cultural stability reflects the desirability of the child maintaining an ongoing connection to, and understanding and learning of, culture, family, tradition, language, religion, beliefs, values and stories;
>
> relational stability reflects the desirability of the child's positive, loving, trusting and nurturing relationships and emotional connection with significant others, such as parents, siblings, friends, family and carers.

I think we all understand the intent of ensuring that those elements are met in the best interests of the child, but when the court is determining that, is there anything that you think or the government feels should be taken into consideration? If all of those elements are there and the parents are saying that is

what they are providing and they are connected to community and all of these other elements that are spelt out in clause 4, what if there is clear abuse within that setting? Do these elements override the degree of abuse? It is hard to interpret, and I know you have said it is hard basing it on a hypothetical, but what I am trying to determine is: is there a threshold here of the best interests of the child, taking into consideration all of those aspects?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: As you have identified, the plain English version of the clause notes in the explanatory memorandum speaks to this. Section 10 of the act speaks to the court having to weigh up these decisions, but ultimately no case is going to be the same, and there is not a – to use your expression from earlier in the day – a tick-the-box answer for any individual child. They are going to have to weigh up those decisions, but ultimately what comes first is the best interests of the child, and in accordance with section 10, the court making a decision about how they weigh up the various factors in doing so.

Clause agreed to; clauses 5 to 7 agreed to.

Clause 8 (18:09)

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: I invite members to vote against this clause. This amendment was spoken to once again at length in my speech. This amendment is to repeal section 276A of the act. Section 276A previously required the court to have regard to secretary advice. It is our view that the court should have more discretion to act in the best interests of the child and that the current level of secretary oversight causes disproportionate adverse impact on Aboriginal families.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: The government does not support this amendment. The factors in section 276A are designed to support the court to make decisions in the best interests of the child based on the circumstances of each case, as I was also referring to earlier. Section 276A does not impact or alter the best interests principles, which are the paramount consideration in all decision-making for children under the act, as we have just discussed. This includes advice provided by the secretary relevant to risk assessment and timely decision-making. Section 276A requires the court to consider advice from the Secretary of DFFH on certain matters when making protection orders, including the child's case plan, care arrangements for the child's siblings, the age of the child and the period of time that the child has spent in out-of-home care during the child's lifetime. Where the court is determining whether to make a protection order that confers parental responsibility on the Secretary of DFFH, the court must have regard to advice from the secretary regarding the likelihood of the parent permanently resuming care of the child, the outcome of prior attempts at reunification, the desirability of early decision-making for the child in cases where the child's parent has previously had another child permanently removed, and the benefits to the child of making a care-by-secretary order to facilitate alternative arrangements for the permanent care of the child if the child has been in out-of-home care for 24 months and there is no realistic prospect of the child's safe return to parental care within the coming 12 months, and these matters remain relevant to the court's decision-making. Section 276A does not specify how this advice is to be taken into account by the court, require that certain decisions be made as a result of that advice or prevent the court from considering other factors to be more important. As in all decision-making under the act, the best interests of the child remain paramount.

Clause agreed to; clause 9 agreed to.

Clause 10 (18:13)

Georgie CROZIER: Minister Carroll stated in Parliament on 29 October that this bill will provide the Children's Court with 'greater discretion and flexibility in relation to the duration of family reunification orders'. Will this flexibility lead to children being left in a cycle of uncertainty where the court is able to continually extend orders? I know you just spoke about that 24-month period, and I was going to ask this on clause 6. With unlimited 12-month extensions, what safeguards will be in the bill to prevent that ongoing cycle?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: There is an important reason as to why we wanted these two bills to be debated today together. They are complementary in the sense that the earlier bill we have all just voted for – and I appreciate the chamber's support for that – sets up a new framework for vulnerable children and families to ensure that they get the service supports that they need from across the whole of government. That was an important complement to this bill, because in restoring the balance and making sure that we gave the courts back the discretion rather than it being simply a blunt instrument, we are saying that we want to support family reunification because it is a fundamental right of any child so long as it is safe to do so and it is in their best interests for them to be raised by their biological family and that where families are complex or there is trauma or there are issues that need to be addressed, we have a service system that is better designed to support those families to do that, to access the supports that they need, and for the court then to have the opportunity to take into consideration that a family has been able to use those service system supports to address whatever their particular circumstances might have been.

We used earlier today the housing issue. It might be drug and alcohol treatment. It might be something else that a family needs to have access to, consistent access to, and be able to demonstrate that they have taken advantage of to then be able to prove to the court that their family reunification is possible and for them to consider that in the best interests of children. So these bills are complementary. On one hand, in the stability bill we are ensuring that we restore that balance, but we are also, through the bill that we passed earlier today, ensuring that we have a framework of service delivery and an accountability to the Parliament for how ministers across their portfolios make sure that children and families get the services and the supports they need.

Georgie CROZIER: I know the intent and I completely understand what the government is trying to do here, but we know that there are not enough rehabilitation services for drugs and alcohol right across the state, and especially in regional areas that have got limited access. I am just concerned if there is a failure. You have said that ministers have a responsibility in these various areas to provide a plan, but if there is no drug or alcohol rehabilitation available, will those failures by government, if you like, be used as an excuse for the extension of keeping a child's care decisions in limbo? Again you will say – well, I am sure you will say – the court will make that decision, but if there is no access to services, can you guarantee that the child's care is not put in jeopardy or that they are being placed in limbo because of that lack of service in other areas of government?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: As we have already discussed, the best interests of the child remain the paramount consideration, so if an extension is not in the best interests of a child, an extension would not be granted. But the other consideration, or the point to emphasise, is that the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing will identify and work case by case, ensuring that we do not have case drift, by strong internal monitoring that both provides the secretary and responsible delegates with system-level oversight of the efforts towards stability and support case practice and also enables the identification of the number of cases in a local area where reunification has not been achieved in a timely fashion so that child protection staff can undertake a case review to identify and take action to address barriers to reunification.

The framework is a dynamic tool that enables operational staff and policy teams to extract and analyse data in real time, and the monitoring framework is for internal departmental use only, but the department may use the insights and data to periodically brief external stakeholders on the impacts. The risk of case drift is also addressed by the maximum duration of family reunification orders, which ensures that each child's best interests are periodically reassessed by the court. And the department continues to support national data collections, including the ones that, again, we have spoken about a number of times today – the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) and so forth. The statutory review in the bill will also provide an important opportunity to comprehensively consider the impact of the reforms after five years of operation, including any impacts in relation to potential case drift. So at an operational level, at a case-by-case level, at a systemic level and of course at a judicial

level there remains that oversight, and always what is in the best interests of the child, at each and every juncture, is the paramount consideration.

Georgie CROZIER: I know what you are trying to achieve. I am just worried about that case drift. I am trying to get to: what is the threshold? Given the bill allows unlimited 12-month extensions, is there a timeframe? Are you saying that potentially, given the court's discretion, this could go on for many years, like we have seen in the past? That is why I am saying a child might be in limbo for years because the parents or parent cannot access the services or there is some other reason. Is there a threshold on this of how long a child can be in that case drift scenario?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: The intention of this bill is stability, not case drift, so we do not intend for any children to be stuck in a case drift scenario. But I understand what you are seeking. The criteria are designed to ensure that the court determines whether a family reunification order extension is in the child's best interest by considering factors that either weigh against or in favour of an extension. These factors will be considered alongside the best interest principles set out in the act, and they include the desirability of continuity and stability in the child's care, including stable and enduring arrangements for care and parental responsibility and, as you read out earlier yourself, the child having physical stability, cultural stability and relational stability. In practice what that means is the additional criteria may be considered in the following way. For example, to take your point about whether or not parents had access to services, this may weigh in favour of or against granting an extension. Significant duration or a number of previous extensions will generally weigh against further extensions. Where parents have been offered services but have not engaged with these services, without a reasonable justification, nor shown sustained change, this would generally weigh against an extension. Ultimately, though, it will be for the court to determine what is in the best interests of each child based on their unique circumstances. Without hypothesising about each and every child's individual circumstances, it is difficult to provide you with more than that.

Georgie CROZIER: I appreciate that, and I am just trying to tease out some of these issues around the bill because clause 4, as we have gone through before, is talking about the decision-makers having to consider certain aspects, I state again, of how physical stability, cultural stability and relational stability reflect the desirability of the child's situation. So it is all very well intended, but if in reality those desirability elements can be met but there is not the actual physical ability for government services to be able to deliver something, is there a threshold, a maximum time, that the government sees? Even though we meet those aspects under the desirability criteria, is that really good enough for a child who might be at risk if those extensions are continuing?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: As I have said, the bill maintains a framework of fixed order and extension length, which will require the Children's Court to consider the best interests of the child at regular intervals of no more than 12 months. Ultimately, it will remain a matter for the court, but it is envisaged that the court is the check-in which ensures that we do not have case drift. Whilst we know that the majority of reunifications will actually happen in a shorter period of time, it does remain a blunt instrument as it stands, and what we are seeking to do is restore that balance by not completely removing the test of the court but making sure that there is that check-in which ensures that there is that oversight from the court as to what is in the best interests of the child.

Georgie CROZIER: Beyond the *Yoorrook for Justice* report, can you explain the specific grounds or investigations and data analysis which informed the decision to remove the time limit on family reunification orders? And has the government considered research on the long-term effects on children of going through the trauma of having continuous orders being applied?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: The bill has been informed by academic research; previous reviews examining the permanency settings, including the Commission for Children and Young People's previous reviews – I know we have quoted them a number of times today; as well as the *Yoorrook for Justice* report, as you identified; child protection data published by the AIHW; internal departmental data; and the input of experts within the sector. This data shows that most families do achieve the

reunification in a timely manner, indeed in less than 24 months. However, it also did highlight that a small number of families require longer to achieve safe and successful reunification. Sector experts provided evidence that current rigid timelines on family reunification orders do not provide sufficient flexibility to take account of complex family dynamics or factors outside of parents' control, such as access to services. This is supported by the findings of the permanency amendments longitudinal study, which found that the permanency amendments had resulted in unforeseen results in court, including delays in resolving protection applications and extensions to family reunification orders without compelling evidence of likely permanent reunification. Risk of re-entry to care is higher for families where reunification is attempted too quickly, which is the other side of this, with higher rates of re-entry where permanency decisions are made prematurely. Expediting permanency decisions may not consider the negative effects of quickly placing children in permanent care arrangements where there may be unintended results of returning to unsafe homes.

Georgie CROZIER: Minister, is all that data and the reports that you have just referenced publicly available? Is that all on the public record?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Certainly the AIHW data is on the record. We have used internal departmental data, obviously, to inform our decision-making as well.

Georgie CROZIER: Can the house have a copy of that data that informed your decision-making?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Any of the data that is public that I have spoken to – as I have said, some of it is internal departmental data that is not publicly available and cannot necessarily be made publicly available, but academic research, such as the panel's report, is available through my Yoorrook evidence, for example.

Georgie CROZIER: When you read it all out – I am just trying to understand, because it was very quick. University data obviously is public. Could you just clarify what is public and what is interdepartmental data?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: I did not speak to specific internal departmental data, to your question, but we have certainly been informed by internal departmental data. In relation to the academic research – for example, the permanency amendments longitudinal study report, which is part of my evidence at the Yoorrook Justice Commission – that is publicly available.

Sitting suspended 6:29 pm until 7:31 pm.

Clause agreed to; clauses 11 to 14 agreed to.

Clause 15 (19:32)

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: I invite members to vote against this clause. The purpose of this amendment is about avoiding the introduction of further uncertainty and instability for children, families and carers by reopening the legislative framework within a short and fixed timeframe. This amendment also reflects stakeholder advice.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: The government will not be supporting this amendment. We support there being a review of the bill. We have specifically put it at five years. We think this is appropriate as it is in line with standard practice across other significant bills and considering the significance of the reforms, which will impact children and families, the operations of the Children's Court and the child protection system. To Ms Crozier's point earlier, we want to make sure that the reforms are operating as intended, so it is appropriate that they be reviewed.

David ETTERSHANK: Legalise Cannabis will be supporting this amendment. We think it has great merit.

Clause agreed to; clauses 16 and 17 agreed to.

Reported to house without amendment.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (19:35): I move:

That the report be now adopted.

Motion agreed to.

Report adopted.

Third reading

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (19:35): I move:

That the bill be now read a third time.

Motion agreed to.

Read third time.

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: Pursuant to standing order 14.28, the bill will be returned to the Assembly without amendment.

Crimes Amendment Bill 2026

Introduction and first reading

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT (19:35): I have received the following message from the Legislative Assembly:

The Legislative Assembly presents for the agreement of the Legislative Council 'A Bill for an Act to amend the **Crimes Act 1958** to make further provision in relation to who can commence a prosecution for an offence against section 195N(1) or 195O(1) of that Act and for other purposes.'

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (19:36): I move:

That the bill be now read a first time.

Motion agreed to.

Read first time.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: I move:

That the bill be treated as an urgent bill.

Motion agreed to.

Statement of compatibility

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (19:37): I lay on the table a statement of compatibility with the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006:

Opening paragraphs

In accordance with section 28 of the *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006*, (the Charter), I make this Statement of Compatibility with respect to the Crimes Amendment Bill 2026.

In my opinion, the Crimes Amendment Bill 2026, as introduced to the Legislative Council, is compatible with human rights as set out in the Charter. I base my opinion on the reasons outlined in this statement.

Overview

The Bill seeks to amend the *Crimes Act 1958* in relation to the prosecution of serious vilification offences.

Human Rights Issues

Human rights protected by the Charter that are relevant to the Bill

Right to retrospective criminal laws

Section 27 of the Charter provides that a person must not be found guilty of a criminal offence because of conduct that was not a criminal offence when it was engaged in, and that a penalty must not be imposed on any person for a criminal offence that is greater than the penalty that applied to the offence when it was committed.

The Bill amends section 195Q of the *Crimes Act 1958* to remove the requirement for the Director of Public Prosecutions' consent to police prosecutions of serious vilification offences, namely sections 195N(1) and 195O(1) of the *Crimes Act*, unless the accused is under the age of 18 years. A transitional provision, new section 640C, provides that section 195Q of the *Crimes Act* as substituted by the Bill applies in relation to an offence against section 195N(1) or 195O(1) irrespective of when the offence is alleged to have been committed. These offences commenced operation on 20 September 2025.

While this provision will amend the consent requirement retrospectively, it does not limit or interfere with section 27 of the Charter. Section 195Q of the Crimes Act is a procedural provision and does not alter the elements or penalties of the offences in sections 195N or 195O of the *Crimes Act*.

Protection of families and children

Section 17 of the Charter protects the rights of families and children. Section 17(2) recognises the vulnerability of children because of their age, conferring additional rights on them. It is concerned with protecting the 'best interests of the child' (*Certain Children by their Litigation Guardian Sister Marie Brigid Arthur v Minister for Families and Children* [2016] VSC 796 [145]).

While the Bill removes the requirement for Director of Public Prosecutions' consent to police prosecutions for serious vilification offences alleged to have been perpetrated by adults, section 195Q(b) of the *Crimes Act* requires Victoria Police to obtain the Director of Public Prosecutions' consent to charge an accused who is a child (under 18 years of age) with serious vilification. This safeguard promotes the protection of children by ensuring that their unique characteristics and vulnerabilities are considered by the Director of Public Prosecutions before deciding to proceed with a prosecution.

The Hon. Enver Erdogan MLC
Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation
Minister for Corrections
Minister for Youth Justice

Second reading

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (19:37): I move:

That the bill be now read a second time.

Ordered that second-reading speech be incorporated into *Hansard*:

The Crimes Amendment Bill 2026 will amend the *Crimes Act 1958* in relation to the prosecution of serious vilification offences.

The Bill will change the Director of Public Prosecutions' (DPP) consent framework regarding the serious vilification offences in section 195N(1) (incitement on ground of protected attribute) and section 195O(1) (threaten physical harm or property damage on ground of protected attribute) of the *Crimes Act 1958*.

These offences, and other landmark reforms, were contained in the Justice Legislation Amendment (Anti-vilification and Social Cohesion) Bill 2024 (the 2024 Bill).

Currently in Victoria, due to amendments made during Parliamentary debate on the 2024 Bill, a prosecution for a serious vilification offence may only be commenced with the consent of the DPP and the DPP must consider all the circumstances, including social, cultural and historical factors, before doing so. This additional prosecutorial burden may impact the effectiveness of these offences, preventing or delaying police from using them when appropriate to respond to seriously hateful conduct which is of concern to the Victorian community.

The Bill will revert these aspects of the anti-vilification laws to the form in which they were introduced into Parliament by the government. In particular, the Bill will amend section 195Q of the *Crimes Act 1958* to provide that the DPP's consent is not required for a police officer to commence a prosecution for a serious vilification offence unless the accused person is under the age of 18 years. Consistent with the approach to

the Nazi symbol and Nazi salute offences, this safeguard ensures children's unique characteristics and vulnerabilities are considered before deciding to proceed with a prosecution.

The Bill also provides that only Victoria Police and the DPP will be able to commence prosecutions for these offences, meaning that private citizens are not able to do so. This will ensure there is a level of experienced prosecutorial oversight before a matter progresses to court, involving a consideration of whether there is sufficient evidence to support a conviction. It will not prevent any person from making a complaint to police when they think they have experienced or witnessed serious vilification.

Removing the explicit requirement on the DPP to consider surrounding circumstances, such as social, cultural and historical factors, does not mean that the DPP or police officers will not consider such circumstances. Police officers and the DPP would still be required to consider whether alleged offending was likely to incite hatred against, serious contempt for, revulsion towards or severe ridicule of the target person or group with the protected attribute. This necessarily requires taking the surrounding circumstances into account.

These changes will apply to a serious vilification offence irrespective of when it is alleged to have been committed, noting that these offences commenced on 20 September 2025.

Together, these reforms will help facilitate timely, appropriate and effective responses to serious vilification conduct.

I commend the Bill to the house.

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (19:37): I move:

That debate on this bill be adjourned until the next day of meeting.

Motion agreed to and debate adjourned until next day of meeting.

Business of the house

Orders of the day

Lee TARLAMIS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (19:37): I move:

That the consideration of order of the day, government business, 3, be postponed until later this day.

Motion agreed to.

Bills

Energy and Other Legislation Amendment (Resilience Reforms and Other Matters) Bill 2026

Second reading

Debate resumed on motion of Gayle Tierney:

That the bill be now read a second time.

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (19:38): I will not say I am pleased to rise, but it is in order to make a contribution to the Energy and Other Legislation Amendment (Resilience Reforms and Other Matters) Bill 2026. This is a classic omnibus bill that seeks to do quite a bit here and quite a bit there, and I will go through the provisions step by step. There are a few issues we have with this bill. It is a bill that we were not necessarily intending to oppose, but I do want to put on record some points about the way the government has managed this particular bill.

The main purposes of the bill include to amend the Electricity Safety Act 1998 to require distribution companies to prepare network resilience plans and to provide for the approval and enforcement of network resilience plans. It amends the Electricity Industry Act 2000 and the Gas Industry Act 2001 to provide increased flexibility for the setting of retailer obligations to life support customers. It amends the National Electricity (Victoria) Act 2005 to clarify the eligibility for payments to landholders by limiting it to interests in land in relation to major new transmission infrastructure, to make further provisions in relation to the issue of grid impact authorities, to confer further functions in relation to the national electricity market onto VicGrid and to make further provision in relation to preferred transmission project areas of interest within and between renewable energy zones (REZs). It amends also the Energy and Land Legislation Amendment (Energy Safety) Act 2025 – schedule 1

of that act – to include consequential amendments to the Electricity Safety Act 1998, additional amendments to change references to 'enforcement officer' to 'authorised officer'. It amends the Victorian Energy Efficiency Target Act 2007 to repeal certain provisions. It amends the National Electricity (Victoria) Amendment (VicGrid Stage 2 Reform) Act 2025 to make an amendment that is consequential to amendments being made to the National Electricity Act (Victoria) 2005 relating to preferred transmission project areas of interest and between renewable energy zones, and it amends the Advancing the Treaty Process with Aboriginal Victorians Act 2018 to make further provision in relation to the composition, structure or legal form of the Self-Determination Fund referred to in the act. We have some amendments. I am happy for those amendments to be circulated at a convenient point, if that is possible.

I also understand that the government has amendments. I am going to just put on record my concern at the government's approach to this. I had a call on Thursday of the last sitting week to say, 'We've got amendments to this bill. We'll brief you.' We booked a room for the minister and her staff to brief us Thursday of the last sitting week. The bill was still in the Assembly at that point. Then the government cancelled that briefing. Today the chief of staff to the Minister for Energy and Resources called to say, 'Oh, we have got amendments for this bill, and we want to brief you on it.' I said, 'Thank you, but why on earth were we not briefed earlier? Why were we not briefed in the sitting week before? Why were we not briefed in the non-sitting week in between? Why has it been left to this hour at that point for us to be briefed?' The truth is we are going to be briefed tomorrow morning at 8:30 on amendments. I am not sure about the crossbench and what briefings they have had. But given the consequential nature of the amendments – I am going to put on record the general nature of those amendments rather than the specifics – we think it is very poor form that the government would seek to delay that briefing for so long. We do not think that is the right way for the government to go around its approach. I am thankful that we are going to be briefed tomorrow morning, and I will be asking the department some questions.

But let me just say, essentially what the government is going to seek to do with its new amendments is to amend the electricity act to make some provisions around compulsory acquisition, and it will also seek to weaken the controls that are around the very important Environment Effects Act 1978 and enable them to start purchasing and compulsorily acquiring land before an environment effects statement (EES) is completed. This seems to me to be very problematic indeed. It seems to put the cart before the horse. You do want to do proper environmental effects assessments before you do major projects, and you do need to do that in a thoughtful and genuine way. This, at a minimum, undermines the Environment Effects Act activities and approach.

Essentially, there are a number of things here in the bill. The resilience reforms are not things that in fundamental measure we disagree with; we see the logic of them. We are a little concerned about a greater involvement for regulations with resilience reforms and the designating of who will have the support and so forth in certain circumstances, such as the life support aspects in the electricity act and the Gas Industry Act. We understand it is part of a review that happened – the *Electricity Distribution Network Resilience Review* – supporting priority restoration of power following prolonged power outages. In that sense, we certainly do not oppose those changes.

The energy upgrades program, I might add, is a circus. The state government has the energy upgrades program. It is a very expensive program. There is some worthwhile work being done, but there have also been some major blunders and errors. Who can forget those refrigerators lined up outside businesses? In some cases, up to four and six refrigerators were delivered to businesses. Many businesses could deal with one more energy-efficient fridge – it makes a lot of sense – but very few had need for four or six fridges. So what I am saying is there are problems with the energy upgrades program and its management and the competence with which it is managed.

We note that the act was reviewed, and that review has not become public. We note that the government amended the relevant bill last year in April, and now this pulls out and repeals part 4 of the Victorian Energy Efficiency Target Amendment (Energy Upgrades for the Future) Act 2025,

which was intended to strengthen existing offence provisions and key definitions. Subsequent policy analysis has shown that these changes would unintentionally exclude a key business model responsible for delivering a substantial share of the energy upgrades program. I will be asking in committee – and I put this on record for the minister now – for a copy of that review. We think the review is not up to scratch. It is the department reviewing itself, so it is marking its own homework, and we know the department has failed in a substantial way in many aspects with this program. You amend the bill last year in April – now you pull out those bits. We are not opposing that, but we do note the incongruity that is involved and the fact that the review has still not been released.

The VicGrid reforms: VicGrid obviously adopted a different approach to renewable energy zones and transmission infrastructure. We have a number of concerns with that. We did vote against substantial matters in the VicGrid bill, not that we object in principle to the return of many of these powers to the state from national bodies. We would prefer that they be undertaken here, and in that sense VicGrid is closer to the state position. We were supportive of that part of the model; it is actually the implementation that is the question.

The flexibility in the making of renewable energy zone orders and the assessment of renewable energy zone scheme authorities: first, the bill allows renewable energy zones to be declared where there is existing sufficient transmission infrastructure or where there is not yet a proposed transmission project on the planning horizon, and on it goes. Let me just say we think it has been a series of blunders in the declaration of renewables zones. I have had people in the wind industry say to me, 'We'd prefer to be out of a renewable zone,' and they are worried about the cost of the renewable zones. They are worried about the involvement of an overarching committee that the minister will appoint that will have control over the support and compensation given to communities. They think that this is not a nimble and targeted approach. They think they would be better doing it themselves, and I suspect they are right. So we think there are a lot of problems with the way the REZs have been declared. We think there are a lot of problems with the way VicGrid is operating. Nobody in country Victoria thinks VicGrid is operating well; they think it is an overbearing organisation with an arrogant approach. The suite of additional powers that were taken recently, the ability to impose those powers and to impose greater fines – all of this is essentially massive overkill. So we have some problems with that section.

The treaty itself and Self-Determination Fund reforms: we have some problems there with the treaty payments, which are going to be made to traditional owners through some of these mechanisms. In common with other sections of the electricity provisions, there are more and more and more costs being loaded onto the bills. More costs, environmental projects, traditional owners compensation – the list is very long, and the amount is now very great. Families are reeling from the cost-of-living issues that are being imposed on them, and a lot of it is through the supply charge on their electricity bills. More and more costs are being loaded onto families and being loaded onto small businesses. They are buckling under the cost-of-living crisis and this government has pushed up power prices, and part of that increase – only part of it – is due to these matters that are being loaded onto bills. We think some transparency is required there as well.

We think that across a wide front, not just traditional owner payments but land compensation payments more generally, the Victorian energy upgrades aspects, all of those, ought to be more transparently declared to consumers. They get at the moment a bill where they can see their electricity usage and they see the supply charge, but they do not know how the supply charge is broken up. That supply charge contains all of those components: the VEU scheme, the payments to traditional owners, the payments to landholders. All of these are loaded in and loaded and loaded and loaded and loaded up so that every family is buckling and businesses are buckling under the additional costs that are being loaded onto them. We say there needs to be greater transparency, and one of our amendments goes directly to that. I will say that it deals with this aspect with traditional owner payments here, but in the longer term we believe that there should be a broader arrangement of transparency so that people can see what they are paying and where it is going. At the moment they cannot.

The work done by Gavin Dufty at the tariff tracker project is actually quite instructive. It is the best work of its type. It follows the actual bills that people have paid over the previous 12 months. It looks at the bills, it breaks them down and it tries to work out what is happening company by company and individual user by individual user. In that sense it is the most reliable information about what people are actually paying in their bills and what small firms are actually paying. Small businesses are being clobbered in the same way, and they can ill afford these additional costs being loaded onto them. Now we have got massive new wires planned across the state, and they are going to jack up the electricity costs of everyone. The wire costs are going up and up and up, and the electricity costs are going to consequently go up and up and up. So Victorians need to prepare for a massive surge in costs that is coming from what this government has done.

The compensation arrangements that are being paid, the local payments that are intended to be paid, will also feed onto the bill, and they will also jack up the bills. So people are paying and paying and paying through the nose, and they cannot see honestly and clearly what they are paying. The time has come for greater transparency, for greater openness and for greater honesty about what people are paying. I think this is a very important point that I am trying to make here, because Victorians are now at the point where they have had too much of this.

We do not agree with the special arrangements the government has sought to make in the bill proper. This is before I get to their amendment that they will move presumably when we get to committee on Thursday. But we do not agree with the special arrangements that seek to sweep aside the proper powers in the environment effects statement, and we do not agree with the arrangements there. So one of our amendments will seek to deal with the special arrangements and fundamentally say energy projects should run the proper gauntlet. This is not to say there should be excessive regulation, but if you are going to have an impact on the local environment, if you are going to have an impact on biodiversity, if you are going to have an impact on large tracts of trees and other vegetation, that should be properly and fairly assessed as part of the environment effects process.

We are troubled by what the government is doing with its special arrangements here. They have got the high penalties that are being imposed in country Victoria, with VicGrid officers having these extraordinary entry powers – extraordinary ability to land people with big fines and big clobbers. At the same time we have got arrangements in place where the normal planning rules have been suspended – VC261; people may remember that in this chamber we sought to revoke it, and we sought to revoke it because the state government is taking all power to itself, to the planning minister, rather than going through the proper process. So we say proper planning processes, proper involvement of local communities, proper ability for people to have their say and proper planning scheme amendments that are put forward that actually have proper council involvement – councils should be central to these matters. And we say that VC261 ought to be repealed. The idea that we are going to give all this power to the Minister for Planning to use to override local community objections I think is reprehensible, and frankly, it is a bit off. That is where we are heading: new powers, extraordinary powers, powers that breach normal conventions in this country that look at community consultation. You only need to talk to many of the people who have been involved with these powerlines to understand the impact it is having on farming communities. We have said there should be proper agricultural assessments. We have said there should be proper environmental effects statement processes. We have said there should be proper involvements for local communities. These are very important steps that we are pointing to.

This bill is a broad bill. It is an omnibus bill, as I have said, and there are parts of it that we agree with and parts that we are entirely neutral about. But some of these parts that seek to put special rules in place that say, 'We're going to override local communities' are problematic, and we are putting on record today the problems that we think are there. We will be saying more about this when we get to the committee stage. We intend to move those two amendments, one of which is about transparency and the other of which seeks to say there are no additional brakes beyond what would normally be the case with an EES. We do not think there is a case being made out by the state government.

We do think that there are some sensible changes and rules that we could put in place. We saw Graeme Samuel's review just a small number of years ago that looked at the interplay between Commonwealth and state environmental effects processes in description. He says that you could harmonise those state and Commonwealth processes and reduce in many circumstances the complexity that is involved and the timelines that are involved. We think that where you can reduce timelines, where you can reduce complexity without weakening the checks, without weakening the balance and without weakening the oversight, that is something that we should look at, and we do think that that could work quite well. We could have an arrangement where, as the state process proceeds, it actually puts in place a consideration of the environment protection and biodiversity conservation arrangements. We think that makes a lot of sense. It smooths the regulatory process, but it does it in a way that does not weaken the oversight.

The problem with the amendments in this bill is they do weaken the oversight, and the problem with the proposed amendment, which the government is going to brief me on tomorrow, is it appears to jump the EES process completely and sweep it aside. We can start purchasing out there – compulsory acquisition – and we can do that before the EES process is completed. That should chill people. This is a government that is not going through the proper steps. What happens if the purchases are made and the steps are begun and suddenly there is a very clear indication from the EES that the process should not have proceeded? It does not seem that the government has thought that through. We will have more to say about that when the minister brings forward those additional amendments.

I think I have laid out the position quite clearly. The bill itself is an omnibus bill. Some parts we support, some parts we are ambivalent about and some parts we do not like. We will have more to say about our amendments in committee and about the government's proposed amendments when they come through.

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (20:00): Thank you very much for the call and opportunity to speak on the Energy and Other Legislation Amendment (Resilience Reforms and Other Matters) Bill 2026. It is always an honour to follow on from Mr Davis in an energy debate. It is a frequent feature of our time here in the chamber, and what have not surprised me are the amendments that have been put before us today. I look forward to the opportunity to discuss them as I read them with much interest, and I thank him for introducing them to our chamber. What I can see amongst them is that we are singling out an itemised line in the first electricity bill of a customer in a year that says how much has been paid to Aboriginal people, not how much has been paid to shareholders, the CEO or any other group. What we have decided, or what Mr Davis, rather, has decided, with the amendment before us is that we should be singling out payments to traditional owners in the bill. I look forward to examining that in committee. I will just let him know that this one has deeply disappointed me, because what we heard in Yoorrook was that there has been a gross injustice done to First Nations people when it comes to payment for resources in our state. Gold is an example that was highlighted. What we are trying to do with this legislation, amongst other things, is to right some wrongs. Instead what we have got before us is an amendment that will stoke further racial division in our state, and that is actually not what we need.

What we do need is a bill that will hold network providers accountable. It will force them to upgrade their infrastructure so that it is absolutely prepared for significant weather events, and that is what we have before us. What we have is a bill that says regional communities are at the front line of the climate crisis, and we recognise that. We are not here to say that when it all becomes a little bit of an emergency and all too hard after a very, very significant event at some point in the future, then we will do something. What we are saying with this bill before us is that through Energy Safe Victoria we will protect these communities through increasingly fierce weather events and the impacts that they have on our communities.

We know that these increasingly frequent and devastating bushfires and other natural disasters are causing some real damage to our transmission lines across the state and blackouts, because I can tell you from this last summer that climate change is undoubtedly making summers hotter, longer and

more volatile to weather events. We have seen the increasing impacts of climate change on people's lives, on their businesses and, critically, on energy infrastructure, as we are discussing in this bill. Over the last month I have seen these increasingly volatile fires and what they have meant for our state, but I have also seen what happens when you invest in renewable energy. I have heard firsthand – and I know that other members from regional communities that are sitting on this side also have heard firsthand – from communities about losing their livelihoods and losing their livestock and what that means. We know that properties absolutely have been lost, but they are more than just houses; they are homes full of countless family memories, and they have been lost at a time with incredibly soaring insurance premiums for farmers that are just trying to do the right thing by their families and continue long-held family businesses and traditions. The stories of these devastating losses are becoming far too common, and it is the severity of our fire season that we should be looking at. Those communities that are on the front line of the climate crisis need to make sure that network providers are not taking them for a ride but that they are placing that critical investment into the networks that means they are much more resilient for the tough times that come with extreme weather events.

Since privatisation in the 1990s the distribution network has been owned and operated by private companies – that is really important for folks to know – and every five years those companies submit network expenditure plans to the independent national regulator, the Australian Energy Regulator, for assessment and approval. The state government does not fund or control the upgrades to the network, but since 2021, when there were significant outage events due to storms – some of us in this place remember that devastation – this government has taken decisive action. We intervened to ensure that those private network providers guarantee that their networks are resilient and consistent with the national rules. We intervened because we know that the damage done by outages across Victoria can be devastating.

Unfortunately, those outages that triggered that intervention in 2021 are not isolated events. As I mentioned, climate change here in our state has made these severe weather events that cause outages more common and more dangerous, and we are all living with it. In June and October 2021 Victoria experienced two extreme storms which caused unprecedented damage to the electricity network. In February 2024, two years ago, we saw another extreme weather event in which more than half a million homes in our state lost power. Just a few weeks ago Victoria experienced record temperatures and record electricity demand. Whilst we had more than enough electricity in reserves to meet this demand this coming summer, the combination of bushfires burning out our poles and our wires and other heat-related equipment failures saw 100,000 homes lose power.

This government understands that while we cannot control the extreme weather events, despite wishing that we could, what we can do is hold these private companies accountable and ensure that they follow their resilience plans to give Victorians peace of mind about their transmission. Following the event in June 2021 the government took immediate action. Under the leadership of the Minister for Energy and Resources Lily D'Ambrosio an expert panel was assembled. That led to the electricity distribution network resilience review being launched. The panel visited communities right across the state and heard the experiences of people that had lost power because of that storm. And it was not just those who had lost electricity; in some cases Victorians had lost their homes, and they had lost faith that the network providers had the capacity and the resilience to guarantee energy supply in times when people need it most. It is interesting to go out to regional communities and see how many of them are finding their own workarounds for the resilience failures that they are seeing in the network. It is all too common to see generators out there in our regional communities, as Ms Ermacora will know and tell you.

The electricity distribution network resilience review was split into two distinct phases: the immediate measures that could be put in before the summer of 2021–22 and overall measures to improve the resilience of the network but also respond to these extreme weather events. From that review there were eight core recommendations and 35 subrecommendations, with the government accepting all but two of the subrecommendations. This led to a further investment of $7.5 million in critical backup

power systems, critically into solar and battery for community centres in those 24 towns hit by the storm. I have seen some of those in action right across the state. It means that in extreme weather events, when these distribution networks fail, our government will ensure that those affected by power outages will always have somewhere to shower, to eat a hot meal, to charge their phones and have access to information. I have had the good fortune of meeting some of the folks in these centres, and I know just what a difference it means to have that energy resilience right there in our community hubs.

I have got to say, we are always looking for ways to ensure that the increased resilience is felt in our energy system in the wake of extreme weather events. After February 2024 and the pretty rough storm, as I recall, the Minister for Energy and Resources initiated the network outage review, again led by experts. This time there was a stronger focus on the operational response of these distribution providers, particularly in prolonged outages. The panel engaged affected communities, emergency services and social and community organisations, but also the distributors themselves, which I think is important. This time the review made 19 recommendations, all of which were supported in full. One of these recommendations was implementing the use of temporary generators in town centres, which this summer we saw AusNet follow through on, and that provided Corryong township with a temporary generator following the fires that devastated the region and destroyed electricity infrastructure. Whether it is ensuring communities in the long or short term can withstand these unexpected outages or ensuring that providers themselves are looking after their customers during these distressing times, the Allan Labor government has taken action and will continue to do so. I have had the good fortune of meeting with AusNet and seeing firsthand their advanced planning with respect to these generators in the areas that they service across the state, and it is really important work keeping power on in these townships during these devastating weather events. It sometimes means that lives are saved.

This bill builds on components of the critical review to ensure Victorians can rely on their distribution networks to continue supplying electricity to them during extreme weather events, and it will ensure that these distribution businesses must publish these five-year resilience plans, as I mentioned earlier. Energy Safe Victoria will ensure that these plans are being implemented – these are not just for the shelf – forcing these businesses to spend money on upgrades that will reduce outages just like the ones we saw over summer and over the last couple of years. From an on-the-ground perspective, that means more batteries, more microgrids and additional feeder lines paid for by these distribution networks, reducing power outages to communities that are already at the forefront of the climate crisis. You see, it is our government that is taking action. We are not just about words but about substantive differences. Understanding how we can support communities when preparing for power outages and holding distribution businesses accountable, we make sure that both are prepared for outages and that businesses respond to their customers when they inevitably do occur.

Whilst we continue to mitigate the effects of climate change through our world-leading emissions and renewable energy targets, which I have spoken about in this place many times before, there is no way to fully prevent volatile weather events, and ultimately this bill represents the steps we are taking to ensure that our state remains resilient in the face of the climate crisis and that our transmission businesses cannot be all talk and no action when it comes to ensuring reliability. What I can say is one of the keys to energy resilience is batteries, whether they are the ones in community centres where residents can go if they lose power or personal home batteries. They soak up the cheap renewable energy from solar panels during the day and distribute it during the night when it is needed or in some cases when there is a power outage. These technologies are fantastic. They are improving every day. Only today I got a message from a very dear friend of mine letting me know that his battery had been installed in his house in regional Victoria, and he is absolutely delighted about it.

We do not know what the Liberals and Jess Wilson believe when it comes to renewable energy technologies and when it comes to climate change. Frankly, I do not know, and I am waiting to hear. There is one thing in the city, one thing in Kew and another in Korumburra; one thing in Hawthorn and another in Horsham; and one thing in Malvern and another in the Mallee. You see, they have

already, unfortunately for so many, bent the knee to One Nation and the conservatives, announcing that they will place restrictions on renewable energy if elected, forcing renewable energy projects to undertake independent agricultural and economic impact assessments, and allow projects to be delayed further through VCAT. This is going to slow the uptake of renewable energy, and it means that these communities will be worse off when it comes to energy resilience.

I can cast my mind back to the last time they were in government, but I have got to tell you I have had conversations with a variety of different stakeholders from our state's regions over the past few months – and couple of years in fact – and in many of these conversations there were clear anger and disappointment at the leaders in these communities insisting on fanning the flame against renewable energy and the resilience so needed in our communities. The truth is that renewable energy is the cheapest form of energy, it is the most abundant form of energy and it is critical to ensuring energy resilience in regional areas. Both our words and our actions matter, and if you cannot be trusted on climate action, you cannot be trusted on securing network resilience for climate-affected communities.

I would like to close today, understanding I am in my last minute, by looping back to a small but significant component of this bill, which I wish I had more time to talk about in fact, which is the impact of climate change and particularly First Nations Victoria. I am really proud of elements of this bill that will ensure the Self-Determination Fund is a fit-for-purpose vehicle to give funds generated through the Victorian transmission and investment network back to traditional owners and to community. I see that that is in fact very much the feature of the amendments put forward by Mr Davis. I know that it is something that I feel very, very strongly about. This bill is about protecting communities at the forefront of climate change, from our beautiful regional towns to Victoria's traditional owners. This bill is at the very heart of our energy future, and I commend it to the floor.

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (20:16): I am pleased to rise this evening to make a few brief comments on the Energy and Other Legislation Amendment (Resilience Reforms and Other Matters) Bill 2026. Indeed in a cost-of-living crisis, when we have been promised for the last eight years, almost 10 years, by Minister D'Ambrosio that costs will go down, down, down, many agencies, the Essential Services Commission being one of them, have regularly reported that rather than down, down, down we are seeing costs spiralling up, up, up. For government members to stand in the other place and in this place to pontificate about what a fabulous job the government has been doing in terms of the energy mix is rather laughable. It would be laughable if it was not so painful for people, particularly out in the regions and particularly for families, individuals and pensioners doing it tough, with their energy bills rising, rising, rising.

We see that there is a lot of lovely discussion and chest beating by government members in relation to energy, but what many of them fail to understand, fail to acknowledge and fail to care about is the fact that whilst people in the city use electricity it is manufactured and it is made overwhelmingly by industry out in the regions. In my electorate of Eastern Victoria Region – and indeed I have said many a time that my office is in Latrobe Valley – I am very passionate about the people who have for over a century kept the lights on in Victoria through coal-fired power stations. I have also said that my grandfather worked for the SEC as a regional manager, putting on power to new locations right across this state.

What I want to acknowledge, though, with the rollout of renewable energies, is that when you talk about renewable energies the government says, 'It's free. We're just trapping the sunlight. We're just capturing the wind.' And that is what renewables do, but from the cradle to the grave they come with an environmental footprint. All of those pieces of equipment, panels, structures and blades are manufactured, requiring electricity and utilisation of resources. They function for the term of their natural life, depending on how long that is, and then they are dismantled and decommissioned, and what happens to them then? I know from previous reports, when I have been on committees, that unfortunately Australia only looks to recycle around 10 per cent. I just want to put that on record. When the government talk about renewables, they should talk and be fair dinkum about the

from-cradle-to-grave footprint and CO_2 emissions et cetera, because you need to factor that in in consideration; it is a very important element.

Clearly the Nationals have always said overwhelmingly that we are agnostic about energy production, that we want the best value, the lowest environmental impact and the most reliable, dispatchable energy to be able to provide electricity and gas not only for our homes but also to power industry, our hospitals and our schools, and the list could go on. I will get to the bill shortly. But when we think about some of the history that it has taken to get to this bill, we saw the government produce last year the VicGrid bill – I think it was the National Electricity (Victoria) Amendment (VicGrid Stage 2 Reform) Bill 2025 – and we were quite vocal in our opposition to that. The primary reason, I have stated before, is because the communities that are impacted by renewables are regional communities, and this government has consistently gone out of its way to disenfranchise, frustrate, distress and create anxiety in the regions where renewables are going through, without good communication and without respect for industries like agriculture which feed and clothe us in this state and are used to create state revenue through export. This government has consistently turned its back on those regional people. We have seen it in terms of VNI West, where we have got transmission lines scheduled, slated to go through. The government has refused to contemplate an alternate route that academics – not Melina Bath but academics – have made stringent assessment of and said, 'Why don't you use a different route, plan B?' We have had farmers rallying on the steps and in communities and in Ballarat, and we saw the Premier down there the other day with not a very healthy reception about this. Why? Because the government is running roughshod over these communities, and we saw that in the VicGrid bill. We saw that there was a power grab. We saw that the government was seeking to undermine property rights. If you buy your farm and you are looking to produce world-class goods from it, now the government can remove that right of appeal, whether it be for transmission lines or renewable energies. They take away your rights and they call that progress.

We believe – the Nationals and the Liberals believe – that people do have rights and that you should be respected and that due process should occur. But we have seen the government call projects in, and there is another one in my patch in Delburn wind farm. They have called it in, and not only have they called it in, they are now funding it through the shambolic SEC. It did not stack up in terms of renewables through a developer, through commercial means; they walked away from that. It was going to cost around $320 million. It did not stack up. The developer walked away. The government comes in and says, 'That's all right; we'll use taxpayers money, $650 million.' It will be more than that, probably. But this is the amount of money that the government is prepared to spend, taxpayers money, on industry that does not stack up through commercial viability. I raise this issue because we have also got a petition there by the Strzelecki Community Alliance that is saying 'Stop this farm'. It is not really a farm, it is a set of 30-something turbines. But the concerns they have are very valid. Delburn was shockingly hit, tragically hit, through the 2009 bushfires. These wind farms are going to be across pine plantation. There has been quite considerable consternation about increased bushfire events and the spreading of bushfire in pine plantations, let alone setbacks, let alone noise and let alone amenity. But this government runs roughshod over landholders.

What we also see in the VicGrid bill that has gone through – the precursor of what we are up to today – the government was able to say, 'That's all right. Not only will we cancel your application – you can't go to VCAT – not only will we disregard you, what we're going to do is we can get our authorised officers to come in and cut your locks. We're going to cut your locks if you want to lock your farm to say you don't want the government officials to come on and assess and look at where transmission lines are going. We're going to cut your locks, and if you seek to defend your right as a property owner, as a farmer, as a landholder, we're going to provide $12,000 in fines.' This is the sort of thing this government does, and it is not fair to people in Korumburra or Delburn. And I am sure the Deputy President here has many areas in her Northern Victoria Region where there is great consternation about solar plants and wind turbines. People feel that they are being steamrolled. This government is not giving fair and due consideration to agriculture, and regional people are certainly paying the price.

If we go to the particulars of the bill – and I know Mr Davis has gone through them in quite a significant manner – firstly, it was interesting that I got a phone call from the Victorian Farmers Federation this afternoon at 3 o'clock saying the government was putting an amendment through. I said to VFF president Brett Hosking, 'Well, Brett, they are putting a bill through,' and he said 'No, but they are putting amendments through.' The government at a late hour has then decided to amend the bill that we are currently talking about this evening, the Energy and Other Legislation Amendment (Resilience Reforms and Other Matters) Bill. It is going to amend its own bill. Okay, that is their right; they are in government. They are going to give the opposition, the crossbenchers and the Liberals and Nationals, a look at what the amendment looks like and a bill briefing the day after we have actually started the debate in the upper house to pass this piece of legislation. This is just so typical of what the government is doing in the regions. It does not know whether it is coming or going.

We have just had a report by the Environment and Planning Committee deposited here today – and I am on that committee. That committee looked into communications and consultation. Well, many times during the course of that committee inquiry we heard that people feel that they are being run over and again that they are being consultold, that they are not being engaged with on a fair and honest level. They are not being told, 'Look, we are going to tell you this, but you have no oversight and no ability to change this. We're just telling you that we are doing it, and we're calling it consultation.' We have seen that time and again, and that is what this government looks to be doing once more.

This bill changes the Electricity Safety Act 1998. It changes the Electricity Industry Act 2000. It amends the National Electricity (Victoria) Act 2005 and makes quite a raft of amendments. One thing I would like to put on record is that community benefits are really important. I have said that the regions will wear these new renewables, they will wear the transmission lines and they will wear the solar farms or the wind turbines et cetera, and they need to have a community benefit. Part of this bill speaks to that – the Renewable Energy Zones Community Energy Funds. It also looks to the Traditional Owners Fund. What we are saying we would like to see with regard to that is that the community does need to have some kickback, some recognition and some understanding. What that looks like needs to be worked through, whether it is cheaper power bills – and we have heard people in my patch talking about that, that the community can obtain cheaper power bills – or whether that money fund goes into a pooled fund. Certainly it cannot go back to another government department to be distributed; it needs to have community input and community control to a large extent. I also say, in terms of the Traditional Owners Fund, that there needs to be localised benefit and locals need to have a say.

What we want to see – and I know Mr Davis is going to put up amendments to do this – is transparency around that. If you think about this, the government is rolling out these, some with the shambolic SEC, others with property developers and commercial entities. I have said that the Nationals are agnostic about energy and renewable energies. We want the best quality, we want the best benefit and we want reliable dispatchable power, but where there are these footprints, communities should benefit and traditional owners should benefit. But there should be transparency and clarity around that. That is only sensible and it is only reasonable. What we do not want to see is a further eroding of property rights. We want to see more transparency, we want to see a democratic process and we will certainly be wanting to see the amendments that the government is putting through sometime tomorrow.

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (20:31): I am pleased to rise to speak on the Energy and Other Legislation Amendment (Resilience Reforms and Other Matters) Bill 2026. It is worth making some remarks on this bill because from the outset it is worthwhile to say that this bill is about building a stronger and more robust resilience into our energy grid. We should all know what the impact is, and in fact many of us in this place do know what the impact can be when the grid fails. Certainly as someone proud to represent the outer urban areas and indeed the outer exurban areas of Melbourne, communities such as mine, including Upper Beaconsfield and similar communities right around this state, are only too familiar with the consequences that can flow when the grid proves to be unreliable. I note that on this bill in the other place the member for Monbulk spoke very passionately about this issue and how it affects her constituents in the Monbulk electorate, with repeated power

outages that we have seen through a cycle of storms and indeed a pattern of storms that are only becoming more and more prevalent. It is of course a fact that we are seeing these sorts of so-called one-in-100-years or other types of natural disasters occurring far too frequently. I note that colleagues on the Environment and Planning Committee have undertaken inquiries into how we actually best adapt to the climate resilience that we are facing and the challenges faced by our changing climate and how we can make our systems more resilient. This bill is one small part of effecting that change. Indeed I note that the member for Monbulk and Mr McIntosh from this place have both been very active in their pursuit of reforms through the federal level and through our telecommunications operators to provide that resilience, because when those mobile phone networks go down in such an event it can become particularly threatening, particularly dangerous and particularly unnerving for communities who are faced with the challenges of not only not having their power but also no way of connecting. It can be a terrifying ordeal. It is not just something as frivolous as the cost of your fridge being out for a couple of hours; it is much, much more significant than that.

Whilst many parts of metro Melbourne are able to have their power restored relatively quickly, for some communities in those outer urban or further exurban or rural areas it can be a matter of days or, in some extreme cases, weeks. That is why this bill strengthens the Electricity Safety Act 1998 by requiring every Victorian electricity distribution business to develop a detailed network resilience plan every five years, improving that requirement from the single one-off that is required under the current legislation and making that every five years, requiring that constant process of evolution and adaptation to our changing climate and the risks that it presents our state.

Indeed we know of many storms and other events, whether they have been minor outages and upsets or very significant ones, including the storms of June and October 2021 or those storms of February 2024, which wreaked enormous havoc in my electorate of the South-East Metropolitan Region, so much havoc that the roof of our electorate office caved in and the office flooded. That storm is the reason why we are still out of a permanent office two years later. My example is one that we have been able to certainly work around and adapt to, but for many communities, these storms are becoming more and more of a threat as they become more frequent and also more severe. In those particular storms we saw 12,000 kilometres of powerlines and poles from across the state's electricity distribution network and transmission network fail, causing power outages that impacted well over 500,000 homes and businesses at their peak, including some communities of mine across the south-east, in parts of Knox, in Upper Beaconsfield and in surrounding areas in particular. Talking to the residents in those areas and talking to the small business owners about not only the impacts of the unplanned disruption but the uncertainty it brought them was very profound indeed. It underscores the efforts and the reasons why we are going through legislation such as this today.

It is absolutely incumbent on all energy distributors to do their best not only to make their networks resilient but also to provide that information in a timely manner to their customers. I do acknowledge again the extensive and incredible work of the lineys, who have gone out and continue to go out whenever there are storms and whenever there are disruptions to reconnect people as fast as they can. There were certainly many issues and grievances aired with AusNet, the distributor, at the time in relation to the complete breakdown and failure of its communication systems and its websites directing people to vague and opaque spreadsheets to get some sort of sense of when their power might come on. But I do acknowledge the work that has been done in the aftermath, certainly by AusNet, with significant pressure applied by Minister D'Ambrosio to Victoria's energy distributors to make sure that their backup systems and their outage trackers are as resilient as can be, because when people do need that information, they critically need it and need it to be as accurate as possible. I do acknowledge the work that has gone on, both from government and from the distributors, to rectify those issues. But it also goes to the point of underscoring why this legislation is so important – because having that continual review, the review at least every five years, of those plans means that Victorians can have more confidence in our energy distribution networks to meet their needs.

It also will create, in the process, a clear and legally enforceable obligation for these businesses to prepare these plans. They will need to be approved by Energy Safe Victoria. They will need to outline the measures businesses will take to prepare for and respond to severe weather events. Indeed the enforceability of these provisions is a very important part of the bill as well. Not only through the implementation of these reforms but through the accountability and enforcement mechanisms with stronger oversight, we will improve the accountability and provide the Victorian community with the confidence that resilience investments are being made and genuinely implemented effectively. Again, that will be particularly profound for the community such as that in the AusNet region, which largely as a consequence of geography – forests, trees and mountains – is uniquely susceptible to these types of outages. It will, I trust, provide those energy customers with a bit more certainty and surety that they certainly deserve.

Civil penalties will apply where a business fails to comply with its obligations, and distribution businesses will be required to take all reasonable steps to implement the projects outlined in their plans. This will ensure that resilience measures are not only planned but also delivered. For households, businesses and emergency services this will mean a more reliable source of electricity, and it will also mean that they are better equipped to withstand the pressures of these more frequent and extreme weather events.

The bill will modernise the life support provisions in the Electricity Industry Act 2000 and the Gas Industry Act 2001. This also enacts another recommendation from the *Electricity Distribution Network Resilience Review*, supporting priority restoration of power following prolonged power outages.

There are many other provisions in this bill, but I do want to focus on the core element of it tonight, which is the resilience piece. Communities on the periphery, such as those I represent and indeed I know that many regional MPs represent to a far greater degree, do rely on that power being there, and these sorts of storms can cause all sorts of havoc and unplanned disruptions. It is not, of course, just storms. It is also bushfires. It is also flood events. It is also any sort of natural disaster that can befall this great land of ours. It is not reasonable, perhaps, to expect that we can guarantee power to every single household and premises at every single time. But what is reasonable and achievable is to put all the mechanisms in place so that our privatised electricity distributors can provide power so that our phones can be charged and we can play videos at all sorts of different times, whether that may be in the home or in the chamber or wherever else we may find ourselves. Having that power is something that is not just nice to have, it is essential for communities and the peace of mind and the certainty that comes with it. It is of course one piece of the puzzle.

As I said earlier in my remarks, the telecommunications piece, though a federal responsibility, is something that is particularly critical. The state has in other areas invested and jumped again into the federal space due to a lack of action historically and invested in, for example, mobile phone towers in growth areas such as in my electorate in Clyde North and indeed right across the state. I know they are in Ballarat and in other regional cities as well. The state has always been prepared to jump in and make those investments, because we are not prepared to see Victorians suffer as a result of, as in that case, a federal Liberal government that is not doing anything. But when it comes to telecommunications, there is certainly still some work to be done in that resilience piece and ensuring that these mobile phone towers are resilient and in the face of storms they are not losing their generator power within a couple of hours – that they are able to sustain for days at a time to ensure that communities have those vital means of communication at the times when that communication is really critical and paramount.

The other part is the energy resilience piece. These reforms will go a great way towards giving Victorians that certainty that they deserve that we are ensuring that the operators of our privatised distribution network are enacting their responsibilities. We are tightening those responsibilities in reaction to the changing climate and the changing weather that we have, and as we are doing so we are putting those accountability mechanisms and those enforcement mechanisms into place as well so Victorians can expect that their electricity distributors are appropriately and in a timely fashion

responding to the changing climate and the risks it poses to our electricity distribution network. With that, I will conclude my remarks, and I commend this bill to the house.

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (20:43): I am very pleased to rise to speak on the Energy and Other Legislation Amendment (Resilience Reforms and Other Matters) Bill 2026 today. We are living in a time of climate change. That is what the science tells us. That is what the extreme weather we have had over recent years tells us, and it is what January just past told us. Our climate is changing. And as chair of the Legislative Council's Environment and Planning Committee, the evidence that our committees received during recent inquiries – including the inquiry into the 2022 floods, the inquiry we have completed recently into climate resilience and certainly the some of the submissions that have started coming in for our inquiry into the 2026 summer fires – is showing that we are experiencing increasing levels of climate change. Bushfires, storms, coastal erosion, heatwaves, droughts and floods are becoming more common. Average temperatures are rising. There are more days above 35 degrees than ever before.

One of the starker pieces of evidence we received during the climate resilience inquiry was a witness in Mount Macedon who said they were responding to bushfires and floods on the same day. Earlier this year we saw in the Otways that whilst a bushfire was burning one day there was flash flooding the next, and those stark images of cars being carried out to sea I think will live with many Victorians for a long time. These extreme weather events are resulting often in power outages, and these power outages affect a wide number of people and households right across Victoria. They are becoming more common and more prolonged as extreme weather becomes more common. There are nearly 150,000 kilometres of distribution lines in Victoria and more than 1.3 million power poles, all of which are owned and managed by a few private companies. As extreme weather leaves them susceptible to damage – whether that is fire, wind or lightning – they are vulnerable. Following the storms of 2021 nearly 250,000 households and businesses were left without power in June, and in October it was more than 520,000 – nearly a quarter of all Victorian homes. Prolonged outages were experienced in significant parts of Victoria. Obviously this is a time when we are experiencing record demand for electricity in and around our everyday lives, and many of these factors are why upgrading our network and improving the resilience of our network is even more critical.

We were out in Emerald as part of the climate resilience inquiry, and the captain of the local fire brigade gave evidence to the committee that:

> … in the aftermath of the storms where houses had no power they hook up the generators and some have candles for light and heat and things like that. One of those was a cause of a house fire. If that was not there, there would very likely have been no house fire.

So we can see the knock-on consequences that people face when they do not have power. Much of the evidence provided to that committee was also about the adverse effects of telecommunications infrastructure being knocked out, and as Mr Galea said, whilst telecommunications infrastructure is obviously the purview of the Commonwealth, resilient telecommunications infrastructure is essential for emergency management and disaster response and for community resilience and rebuilding. But vulnerability was exposed in the evidence our committee received. There is quite a clear need, the climate resilience inquiry found, to address the needs of electricity network outages when extreme weather hits.

Whilst the government, since some sell-offs in the 1990s, may not own the electricity distribution network, we do set the regulatory framework and we can legislate, so this is an important part of this legislation. The bill obligates electricity distribution networks and companies to create and publish network resilience plans and invest in them to ensure the network is resilient to erratic weather and potential power outages. It will do this by amending the Electricity Safety Act 1998 to provide for new obligations for Victorian electricity distribution businesses to prepare resilience plans every five years and submit those resilience plans to the independent safety regulator, Energy Safe Victoria, to monitor and ensure compliance. This will increase Victorian electricity distribution businesses' accountability

by ensuring resilience initiatives are visible and encourage distribution businesses to adopt a proactive network and community resilience strategy.

One of the witnesses to the climate resilience inquiry held by the Environment and Planning Committee, Michael Nolan from Aurecon, said that:

> Dealing with the existing assets is probably the biggest issue because the majority of those assets already exist and were designed for past climate, and the effort to maintain these assets under more extreme, regular events – variability degrades the asset, and the maintenance to prop them up may not be as effective or may require more funding in order to do so.

I think that is a nice summation of the contemporary challenges associated with existing infrastructure and the impact of a changing climate.

The bill will enforce private businesses that operate and maintain the network infrastructure to demonstrate they are investing adequately to protect distribution lines and poles from the impact of climate change. Currently, every five years companies submit network expenditure plans to the independent regulator for assessment and approval, which means that the approach to resilience is in many cases backward-looking, with no assessment of the increased effects of climate change. The bill will make amendments to the definitions provided in the framework in the Electricity Industry Act 2000 and in the Gas Industry Act 2001 and make minor amendments to the National Electricity (Victoria) Act 2005 to clarify language in previous bills.

The bill before us today acquits key recommendations of prior reviews that have occurred of outages and responses, and other measures also illustrate the importance of an energy policy which accelerates the transition to renewable energy, which is a fundamental part of ensuring that the effects of climate change are mitigated into the future. Storms, fires and other extreme weather events are continuing to happen with increased ferocity. The costs of outages are severe for households. We need to take a proactive approach to ensuring that our energy infrastructure is resilient to the significant and ongoing effects of climate change, and this legislation does that absolutely.

Gaelle BROAD (Northern Victoria) (20:50): I move:

> That debate on this bill be adjourned until the next day of meeting.

Motion agreed to and debate adjourned until next day of meeting.

Adjournment

Gayle TIERNEY (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Water) (20:50): I move:

> That the house do now adjourn.

Youth crime

Sonja TERPSTRA (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (20:50): (2350) My adjournment matter this evening is for the Premier in the other place. The action I seek is for the Premier to provide information on the programs available through the early intervention sports and activities menu. I am very proud that as part of our nation-leading violence reduction unit the Allan Labor government is investing $4.92 million over the next four years into this program. Early intervention is one of the most powerful tools we have to make a real difference in the lives of at-risk children. Giving young people meaningful ways to spend their time, helping them stay connected to school and providing positive role models is absolutely vital. The evidence is clear: when students are engaged, active and supported at school, whether through learning, sport or positive relationships with peers and teachers, they are far less likely to be drawn into risky environments. Schools already do an outstanding job working with young people who need extra support, and this menu will give them even more options to tailor programs to individual needs. The sports and activities menu will help create purpose and belonging for at-risk kids. It will give them opportunities to try new things, build confidence and form healthy social

connections. These kinds of supports help keep young people on the right path long before crime ever becomes an option. I want to thank the Premier for her commitment to stopping crime before it starts and for the leadership she has shown in driving early intervention across Victoria. I look forward to receiving her response.

Health system

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (20:52): (2351) My adjournment matter this evening is for the Minister for Health. Given the deeply distressing accounts we have heard from women caught up in the investigation into obstetrician and gynaecologist Dr Simon Gordon, the action I seek is for the minister to explain what steps she is taking to satisfy herself that the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency's current notification protocols to hospitals are sufficient to protect patient safety when serious allegations have been raised. At least a hundred women have come forward and shared their deeply disturbing accounts of their experience with Dr Gordon. The allegations reported include Dr Gordon performing surgery for severe endometriosis even when pathology later showed little or no disease. Some women have had their reproductive organs removed, including their ovaries and uterus, and this is incredibly distressing. It is extensive and serious surgery and will have lifelong impacts on those women who have been impacted. I acknowledge that AHPRA in particular is a federal body, but the minister cannot simply handball responsibility to the feds on this one. While the minister cannot direct AHPRA, she remains responsible for the oversight of the health system. I understand that AHPRA may have been notified of the hospital's concerns more than two years ago. It seems incongruous that there is no system that warns health services of serious concerns regarding visiting medical officers that have been reported to the regulator, and in this case multiple reports were made to AHPRA.

This case raises so many concerns that demand action to restore Victorians' faith in the health system. When the dust settles, the minister must ensure hospitals are immediately informed when a credentialed visiting medical officer is under investigation by AHPRA. If hospitals are not routinely notified, the minister must fix that glaring gap before it puts more patients at risk. When it comes to this matter, the minister must ensure AHPRA's investigation properly hears and considers the voices of those women affected. Finally, the minister must deliver greater transparency and coordination between regulators and health services so that breakdowns in communication can never again undermine patient safety or public confidence. Victorians are entitled to trust the health system that cares for them. When failures like this occur, that trust is shattered. It is your job as minister to restore it, and it is your responsibility, along with other state and federal ministers, to see that the regulator AHPRA is also doing its job.

Wildlife protection

Georgie PURCELL (Northern Victoria) (20:54): (2352) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Corrections, and the action I seek is for him to prioritise funding to the successful wildlife rehabilitation program at Beechworth Correctional Centre. A constituent of mine has operated Beechworth wildlife rescue since 2016. Her partnership with the local minimum-security prison, Beechworth Correctional Centre, has seen incarcerated individuals take on the care and rehabilitation of injured and orphaned wildlife as part of the prison's wildlife program. The program is considered a win–win for all involved. Beechworth wildlife rescue currently covers the costs of veterinary care, medicines, pathology, food and specialised formula and trains volunteer prisoners to care for and prepare wildlife for their return to natural habitats. The partnership has saved the lives of many animals who the rescue would otherwise not have had the capacity to take on. The prisoners experience the healing benefits that come with helping animals in need, as described by participants themselves. This includes Dixie the wombat, who arrived as a tiny orphan joey, requiring intensive and specialised care in order to survive. Prisoner A was assigned as Dixie's primary carer, taking responsibility for her bottle-feeding and daily needs. As Dixie grew stronger, she followed him around the property while he completed other duties. For many participants, it is the first time they have formed a close bond with wildlife, allowing them to appreciate the individuality and personalities of the animals in their

care. On the day of prisoner A's release Dixie was weighed and had reached a healthy weight suitable for release. He returned home and Dixie was released into bushland surrounding the prison that same day. She established a burrow and is still sighted living independently in the wild.

Participants consistently report that taking responsibility for saving an animal who would otherwise not survive brings immense personal reward and improves their mental health and outlook. Some even continue volunteering in wildlife rescue after their release. Prisoner B, for example, has gone on to volunteer with several rescue groups, applying the skills he learned inside to help more animals in need. The program is so popular it now has a waiting list. The minister has previously spoken about this initiative in Parliament, and I understand that he has visited to see it firsthand. Given that demonstrated interest, I hope he will be willing to engage in a constructive conversation about strengthening and expanding it. Beechworth Correctional Centre would like to broaden the program to support more rescue groups and share some of the associated costs. I am therefore seeking the minister's commitment to prioritising additional funding to secure and expand this deeply impactful program.

Ramadan

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (20:58): (2353) My adjournment matter tonight is for the Minister for Multicultural Affairs. Holy Ramadan is once again upon us, a sacred time for reflection, family and faith. I was proud to be in North Melbourne for the fourth annual community iftar hosted by the Huddle. Established in 2010 as the community arm of the North Melbourne Football Club, the Huddle is the cornerstone of my electorate, using sport to foster a strong sense of community and support. This wonderful event brought together approximately 150 people from the local Somali, Eritrean and Ethiopian communities to share in breaking fast. These communities are an integral part of the fabric of Melbourne's north, and their contributions to our social cohesion are immense. The Huddle does incredible work as a community support group, focusing on empowering multicultural young people to build on their strengths and increase their participation in society. The Huddle supports Somali and Afghan young people and their families across Melbourne's north, west and outer south-east by offering culturally safe programs trusted by families. They help young Victorians remain engaged in education and navigate pathways to employment. It is exactly the sort of grassroots engagement that our community is proud to back, supporting community-led initiatives that improve social cohesion and build stronger, safer and more inclusive communities for everyone. It was a privilege to be joined by religious and community leaders, including Sheikh Magan from the Australian Muslim Social Services Agency, who play such a crucial role in bringing together people for these important occasions. Iftar is a beautiful opportunity to renew connections and champion faith. The action I seek is for the minister to join our vibrant, multicultural communities in the Northern Metropolitan Region and celebrate Ramadan and the spirit of iftar with me.

Cultural events

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (20:59): (2354) My adjournment is for the Premier. As Victoria approaches the state election – we are in an election year – I want to raise an important matter regarding multicultural events that are funded by the Victorian government, or the taxpayer, via the Department of Premier and Cabinet. In recent times, several events that have been hosted and funded by the Department of Premier and Cabinet have been conducted in quite a partisan manner. Except for one speech from the Leader of the Opposition at the Premier's multicultural gala, the opposition has either been excluded from official proceedings of all other events, including speaking opportunities at events, or has received limited to no invitations for opposition members to attend. This stands in direct contrast to Labor government MPs, who routinely receive invitations and then can extend complimentary invitations to community members to events that are funded by the taxpayer. Examples include the Premier's Diwali event, the Shrove Tuesday celebration for diverse Christian communities, the Premier's Lunar New Year event and the Premier's iftar dinner. I can confirm the leaders of the Liberal Party, the National Party and the Victorian Greens have not received a single invitation to the Premier's Victorian iftar dinner next week, and the Victorian Parliament's only Vietnamese MP, Mr Trung Luu, was not invited to the Premier's Lunar New Year event.

We know this government stands accused by our integrity agencies of grey corruption. This kind of activity breaks several rules and conventions regarding the misuse of taxpayer funds for political purposes. I will note that the invitation of multiple Labor candidates to the 2022 Premier's Diwali event caused controversy, and I encourage the government not to repeat this regretful partisanship regarding multicultural events in the lead-up to the 2026 election. Events that are funded at significant cost to the Victorian taxpayer should remain strictly nonpartisan. These occasions should be aimed at uniting communities and all of their elected representatives, rather than being used as an opportunity to advance the political interests of the Labor Party in an election year. If the Victorian government wants to host Labor Party election rallies in an election year, the Victorian branch of the Labor Party should fund it. The opposition expects to be included in official proceedings at these events, and it urges invitations to all Victorian MPs to attend. I seek the action of the Premier to include all members of Parliament at these events, rather than misusing taxpayer dollars in a partisan way.

Waste and recycling management

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (21:03): (2355) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Environment, and the action I am seeking is for the government to properly fund and support the rollout of the four-stream waste management system for Victorian councils, in particular in regional and rural areas. When the four-stream waste management system was recommended by the Greens-initiated inquiry into recycling and waste management in 2019, the committee's final report on that inquiry stated that the government should provide funding and support to councils to implement a separate municipal glass recycling bin. Clearly that support has been inadequate. Last year a group of over 30 councils came together to form the local government glass advocacy group, a group aimed at pushing back against the one-size-fits-all approach to the fourth bin rollout. As recently as last month, some councils have passed motions to halt the rollout altogether, with several arguing that we should scrap the separate glass bin and just expand the container deposit scheme. That should be ringing alarm bells for the state government.

We all know councils throughout Victoria are feeling the economic pinch, and while a glass-only bin will ultimately be a positive, this government needs to help councils get it over the line or find a suitable alternative. If councils are experiencing pushback against their request for flexibility, or worse, they do not even know that flexibility is an option, that is concerning. The failure to address this, despite persistent advocacy from local government for some time now, really brings into question the government's interest in making this work, and the evidence suggests they do not actually care. The reality is that the Victorian Labor government's commitment to their own circular economy policy has been a complete dumpster fire: from waste-to-energy incinerators being the new crown jewel of Victoria's waste management plan to their failure to invest in circular economy infrastructure and systems and to the disastrous way they have approached this glass bin rollout. If this government are at all serious about a genuine circular economy, they need to have a long, hard look at themselves.

We have a serious waste and recycling problem here in Victoria, and there is not a quick fix. It is going to take investment, proper partnership and engagement and a genuine commitment to reduce waste and see a truly circular economy. We have got a long way to go. This government urgently needs to get its act together and start working in partnership with local government. This includes listening to councils and providing adequate resourcing and flexibility to support the rollout of a four-stream waste collection.

Southern Metropolitan Region housing

John BERGER (Southern Metropolitan) (21:05): (2356) My adjournment matter is directed to the Minister for Planning in the other place. I am pleased to see that the minister has fast-tracked over 750 new homes to be built near transport, jobs and services, including nearly 400 homes in a $158 million build-to-rent development on Punt Road in Windsor, in my electorate of Southern Metropolitan Region. This development will sit at the doorstep of Windsor and Prahran stations, with tram services to Albert Park and the Alfred Hospital, and the goods and amenities across Chapel Street

within a short distance. The action I seek is for the minister to inform me how much the Allan Labor government has invested in build-to-rent projects in my community of Southern Metro.

Banmira Specialist School

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (21:06): (2357) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Education. The action that I seek is for the minister to commit full funding in the 2026–27 state budget to complete the redevelopment of buildings and facilities at the new campus of Banmira Specialist School. Banmira Specialist School plays a unique role in the educational landscape in Shepparton, serving students from the age of three to 18 who have intellectual disabilities and special needs. Stability and predictability are particularly important to these children. They learn best when they have regular routines and are familiar with their surroundings. That is why it is so vitally important that the new campus of Banmira is fully redeveloped as soon as possible so that students from all year levels can be together on the one campus.

Currently the school is operating over two campuses, with the primary schoolchildren at the new campus and senior grades at the old campus on Verney Road. I recently met with acting principal Jesse Whittaker and school council president Di Stevens, who showed me how well the young students were doing in their bright new classrooms. But I am concerned about students who last year moved from the Verney Road campus to the new campus as primary students and who have now had to return to the old campus this year. This was a big disruption to their learning environment and has significantly impacted these students. The change of campus has also separated numerous students who had established friendships across grades. It is hard to overstate how troubling it is for these vulnerable students to have their relationships disrupted. During my visit to the school the school was dealing with a child who was severely emotionally distressed due to his peer group being at the other campus. Sadly, this child was not able to complete the school day.

These students require stability in their school life, and the school is now bussing students from one campus to another to help those kids keep friendships alive. But this is a costly and inefficient short-term solution. The split between campuses also places additional pressure on some parents who have children at both campuses, creating two locations for drop-off and pick-up. The Victorian government provided $23 million for stage 1 of the school's redevelopment back in 2022–23, but that was four years ago. Since then the school has been left half-finished with ugly fencing and boarded-up, unused classrooms. Stage 2 of the redevelopment is estimated to cost around $30 million.

It is time the Labor government prioritised special needs students and completed the school. I have repeatedly called for funding to finish Banmira, and each time the Minister for Education has replied to say that when making funding decisions the government uses all available information, including assessments, enrolment projections and pre-existing project plans. I ask the minister to take into consideration the educational and personal costs.

Community safety

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (21:09): (2358) My adjournment matter this evening is for the attention of the Minister for Multicultural Affairs. We are certainly living in uncertain times, with increasing war and conflict, a changing digital landscape and a complex security environment. As our security agencies have frequently noted, this has created a very complex matrix of risks and threats. We now seem to have terrorists emerging in Australia with affiliations to dangerous foreign ideologies, such as Islamic State or Nazi ideology. There is also the ever-present threat of foreign interference.

Before the pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong were crushed by the Chinese Communist Party, I met with student activists who were in Australia studying. They described being menaced and harassed here and their families being threatened back home to try and prevent their participation in civic life in Australia. We have also heard reports of the Iranian diaspora being threatened here in Melbourne, in addition to the disturbing reports of Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps involvement in a terrorist

attack right here in Melbourne. In 2020 I was alarmed by indications that the ABC were going to publish what could only be described as a hit piece on Falun Dafa, which could be used by the Communist Party to further their persecution of this group – which is exactly what ended up happening. Apparently, Falun Dafa and the artistic performance Shen Yun have ruffled many feathers. Just last week there were bomb threats at both the Prime Minister's residence and a theatre in the Gold Coast, which had to be evacuated, with the communications referencing the Shen Yun performance. Official statements indicate that there is no evidence of ties to the Chinese government. Maybe that is the case, but certainly their government are happy to exert pressure, including on members of Parliament, to try and dissuade them from supporting Shen Yun or Falun Dafa. I know this because I have personally experienced it.

As with every other Victorian, I will always support the rights of people to live freely in Australia. Between terrorist threats and foreign interference operations, we do certainly live in uncertain times. I have expressed criticisms in the past of ASIO and the Australian Federal Police. Whilst the criticism might be appropriate, we also know that the ability to disrupt terrorist plots or to monitor or disrupt foreign interference is often reliant on tips and reports from communities who know something or have seen something. If patriotism means anything, it means standing with Australia and helping us to defend against our enemies. My request for the minister is to work with her department to ensure that appropriate information about the national security hotline is provided and displayed at relevant multicultural venues.

Energy policy

Tom McINTOSH (Eastern Victoria) (21:12): (2359) My adjournment is for the Minister for Energy and Resources. Could the minister please provide an update on how the government is supporting more Victorians to go electric? We all remember when the Liberal–Nationals shut down Holden and Ford, which saw automotive industries lose jobs in the tens of thousands. The good news is we can bring thousands of jobs back by electrifying our vehicles. EVs are cheaper to run, and if you have got solar on your roof, you can charge them for free. We currently send billions of dollars offshore to foreign economies every year to purchase petrol that is at risk of global price shocks. On the other hand, we can use that money to employ local workers in generation, distribution and electricity connection right here for our electricity needs.

Architects Registration Board of Victoria

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (21:12): (2360) My matter is for the Minister for Planning, and it concerns the proposed abolition of the Architects Registration Board of Victoria. I am in receipt of a letter, as I think many are, from the Association of Consulting Architects and the state and national president Paul Viney. He lays out the membership of that organisation: 187 members – sole practitioners and large firms – and more than 2000 staff. The Silver review has recommended a super licensing body be put in place. The Architects Act of 1991 means that architects are fully funded by their own registration fees. The ARBV:

> … is not a budgetary burden on government; rather, it is a profession-funded safeguard for the … public.

Further:

> The regulatory framework must reflect the complexity of … responsibilities … education accreditation, registration standards, professional conduct …

The current registration board would not be assisted, he says – and I understand exactly the points he is making – by being absorbed into a large, omnibus registration body. For example, there is I understand a very significant risk that accreditation could be put at risk, and that would be deeply regrettable. He asks, respectfully, that:

> … you support the retention of an independent, specialist architectural regulator and oppose any measures that would abolish the ARBV or dilute its statutory role, irrespective of the Government Department or Agency it is … responsible to.

I think he makes a good case. We saw this before the last election. The government was pushing forward with an agenda to deregister architects – to get rid of their registration – and this is a further step in that direction. There is no evidence that a better outcome will be achieved with an overarching superboard, and the minister, I think, needs to look carefully at this and ensure that our standards for architects are not diluted or weakened. It is an ancient profession, it is a respected profession, it is a profession where our built environment and the design that goes with that are very much to the fore, and it is a profession which I believe needs proper respect. I have to say it is a mistake to damage the profession's standing and to weaken its oversight. In that context, I ask the planning minister to look closely at this and re-examine it.

Residential tenancies

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO (Northern Metropolitan) (21:15): (2361) My adjournment matter this evening is for the Minister for Consumer Affairs, and the action I seek is that the government introduce rent controls to stop unaffordable rent increases. Victoria is in a rental crisis, a crisis that my constituents in Northern Metro know all too well, with 40.6 per cent of the population in Northern Metro being renters. The average weekly income in Victoria is roughly $1380. Meanwhile the average rent in Melbourne has climbed to $580 weekly, consuming a whopping 42 per cent of a person's income. That hardly leaves anything left over once the grocery shop has been done, utility bills paid and fuel and transport costs met. Minister, how are renters expected to save for a home and build financial security? The average age of residents in Northern Metro is approximately 30 years of age – the perfect time to start thinking about their future and building up their financial security. People instead are cutting back on essentials just to keep a roof over their heads. I have heard from my constituents who are skipping doctor and dentist visits just to afford their rent. No-one should have to choose between their health issues and their housing.

Across Victoria, people are struggling to make ends meet. The cost-of-living crisis is deepening and creating housing insecurity. People do not know if they will be able to afford their next lease renewal. They are living with constant stress about being priced out of their homes and their communities. For too long the government has allowed rents to keep rising without real limits, and as long as that continues, renting will stay unaffordable. Minister, will you finally take substantial steps to ensure rents are affordable and secure for everyday Victorians in Northern Metro?

School breakfast clubs

Jacinta ERMACORA (Western Victoria) (21:17): (2362) My adjournment matter this evening is for the Minister for Education Ben Carroll. There have now been 65 million free meals delivered through the school breakfast club program. The action I seek is an update on how this investment is supporting student wellbeing and easing cost-of-living pressures for western Victorian families.

Nyora early childhood education

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (21:18): (2363) The action I seek from the Minister for Children is to work directly with the Nyora community, local stakeholders and early childhood providers to progress the establishment of an early childhood education centre in the wonderful town of Nyora. This is to address the barriers that are currently preventing local families from accessing kindergarten in their own community. Across Gippsland we have early learning and childcare deserts – right across my region. Many towns lack that access, and Nyora is one such community that sits outside the established kindergarten network. Presently families must transport their young people, their children, to neighbouring towns to attend early childhood programs. Not only is it inconvenient, it ends up being a structural barrier. Sometimes, once families take their children to other towns, the children may end up going to school in other primary schools as well.

A kindergarten in Nyora would deliver significant benefits. It would improve equity and access, it would strengthen local kindergarten-to-school transitions and it would help Nyora Primary School's long-term sustainability. My colleague the member for Gippsland South Danny O'Brien is actively

engaged with this community, and I commend him for his ongoing work. Nyora Primary School is also well placed as a co-located kindergarten area. It would sit perfectly beside that school. The Nyora Community Development Group is actively supporting this proposal and is open to flexible partnership models. These could include collaborating with approved early childhood providers, staged or modular development options, or philanthropic or community supported approaches as required. The community are motivated, they are solutions focused and they are ready to work with government, and I ask the government to work with them. Nyora is a wonderful town. It is situated a bit over an hour out of Melbourne. It is both in the country, in South Gippsland, but also in a wonderful region close to the city. I call on the minister to work with the Nyora community, the school, the local government and the early years providers to explore a pathway to a kindergarten in Nyora.

Blackburn activity centre

Richard WELCH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (21:20): (2364) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Planning. The community of Blackburn are at this moment feeling like they are being punished for sticking up for themselves. They are being punished for providing the consultation feedback they were asked to provide. Blackburn activity centre is the only activity centre where the borders were announced but not the building heights. In every other activity centre both were announced simultaneously. But in Blackburn they only were told the size, not the heights, and it intruded into a very sensitive area of high-value, high-significance landscape overlays. The community were rightfully outraged. Many put signs in their gardens. There were something like 5000 signatures from a very small area against this, and the government had to retreat because they were in serious trouble in that area.

So the size of the activity centre boundaries was shrunk, but the government made sure they paid for it, because the heights were then subsequently announced and were completely above anyone's wildest, worst dreams of what they could be. In an area which has one- and two-storey buildings only, we have been given 16 storeys. In South Parade, a shopping strip of one and two storeys, it is 12 storeys the length of the shopping strip, and then on the other side of the train station it is 10 storeys. So we are going from a quiet suburban strip to a wind tunnel of 12 and 10 storeys. Down Laburnum Street it is six to eight storeys the length all the way down to Laburnum. This is a traditional tree-lined street.

Members interjecting.

Richard WELCH: The members over there are mocking the community of Blackburn. That is what you are doing. You are mocking the people of Blackburn and their concerns. Even with –

Michael Galea: On a point of order, President, I think Mr Welch is all too aware that we are not mocking any community, we are mocking the appalling housing policy of the Liberal Party.

The PRESIDENT: I do not think that is a point of order.

Gaelle Broad: On the point of order, President, I just want to point out that it is like the old men on the Muppets, listening to these guys tonight. I ask if they could just settle down a little bit.

The PRESIDENT: I call the house to order.

Richard WELCH: Now, to add insult to injury, the consultation website gives a drop-down for how many storeys you would prefer in the activity centre. Guess what the minimum is – eight. So you cannot say two, you cannot say four and you cannot say six. You cannot provide feedback that says, 'We don't actually want any of this at all.' A 16-storey building adjacent to a residential street of single-storey buildings – 16 storeys. So the action I seek from the minister is to update the website and provide proper options for people. If you want feedback, allow them to actually provide it.

Neighbourhood houses

Gaelle BROAD (Northern Victoria) (21:24): (2365) My adjournment matter is to the Minister for Carers and Volunteers on an issue that goes to the very heart of our regional communities, the future

of our neighbourhood and community houses. Across northern Victoria, from our regional centres to our smallest towns, neighbourhood houses are not an optional extra. They are essential infrastructure. Every week more than 185,000 Victorians walk through their doors seeking education, food relief, social connection, emergency assistance and practical support. In many of our communities there is nowhere else to turn, yet these vital community facilities, these community hubs, are being pushed to the brink. Rising power bills, insurance premiums, wages and program costs are increasing, yet core funding has failed to keep pace with CPI for years. Around half of all neighbourhood houses in Victoria are operating at a loss. In regional areas like ours it is simply unsustainable. I have received an email from Kirsten. She wrote:

> Castlemaine Community House and Maldon Neighbourhood Centre were the first place I went to to meet people and find community when I moved to the area. I've learnt new skills, like how to use a chainsaw, I've improved my wellbeing through yoga classes and I've had some wonderful opportunities to volunteer to give back to my community.
>
> Community houses are places to meet, be safe, get help, and to learn. They are the centre of disaster recovery in my community and in good times and difficult times have been a place where my community knows they can … come together. My community house is a unique reflection of my community, reflecting the sense of place and connection of the Castlemaine community.
>
> At a time when people of all ages are becoming disconnected, Community Houses must be supported to keep communities connected and stable.

She mentioned that neighbourhood houses are facing rising costs, increasing demand and an erosion of core funding. Funding no longer covers staff wages, let alone operational expenses, and this cannot continue. In northern Victoria these centres are often the first responders in times of bushfire, flood or personal crisis, and I have seen the valuable work of neighbourhood houses across our region in Eaglehawk, Long Gully and Kangaroo Flat, providing a place of connection, education and food relief. Rochester Community House was a pillar of strength during the floods, and Castlemaine Community House continues to be a central support for the region following the recent bushfires that devastated Harcourt.

The Buloke shire recently moved a motion reflecting their strong support for urgent and increased investment in Victoria's neighbourhood house sector. I also met a number of volunteers from across the state on the steps of Parliament recently, who had come to ask for an urgent restoration of funding. They keep their doors open for the most vulnerable, providing pathways into jobs and training, delivering emergency food and relief and building stronger communities. The Allan Labor government must guarantee sustainable indexed funding so that our neighbourhood and community houses in Victoria can keep their doors open. Regional Victoria cannot afford to lose them.

Windfall gains tax

Trung LUU (Western Metropolitan) (21:27): (2366) My adjournment matter is for the Treasurer regarding the windfall gains tax introduced under the Labor government. Victoria is in the midst of a housing crisis, a crisis that is hurting families, young people, renters and first home buyers across our state. The action I seek is to meet with the Treasurer to urgently review the windfall gains tax and reconsider its implications, assessing whether the tax is benefiting our housing system or worsening an already difficult situation by deterring private investment in new housing. At a time when Victorians are struggling, with housing affordability and rents having risen by more than 30 per cent since 2020, the government should be doing everything in its power to boost housing supply and support those trying to find a place to call home.

Introduced under former Premier Daniel Andrews, the windfall gains tax applies to Victorian citizens when their land had been rezoned by more than $100,000, and if the uplift exceeds $500,000, the tax captures 50 per cent of the increase in value. In practical terms, this means that every project that could deliver new housing, new jobs and new communities is being pushed to the edge of financial viability. The fundamental question is: does this tax support the creation of more homes, or does it discourage it? Because the consequences are real. When government policies make housing projects unviable,

fewer homes get built. When fewer homes get built, prices rise and rent increases, and when this happens, it is first home buyers, young families and everyday Victorians who pay the price.

Analysts say that removing the windfall gains tax would support delivering up to 3100 additional homes every year, creating more than 2700 new jobs and injecting around $1.4 billion into the Victorian economy annually by 2030. These are homes that people need, jobs our community needs and economies and activities our state needs. Property taxation already makes up the largest component of state revenue, so it is not unreasonable for Victorians to ask whether adding yet another tax onto rezoning is helping or hindering the supply of housing in a state already stretched to its limits. A responsible government should always focus on increasing housing supply, not imposing taxes that undermine project feasibilities and put families further out of reach of home ownership. It is time we take a serious, evidence-based look at the windfall gains tax. It is time to ensure that our policy supports rather than constrains the homes that Victorian communities urgently need. I ask the Treasurer to conduct an urgent, immediate review of the windfall gains tax and reconsider its implications.

Greater Geelong school bus services

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (21:30): (2367) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Education and concerns the school bus safety crisis in Greater Geelong. Weeks ago I raised concerns about overcrowded buses, students standing at highway speeds and suburbs like Fyansford with no workable service. Since then a year 8 student has fractured his jaw and damaged his teeth after falling when a high-speed bus braked suddenly. St Joseph's College principal Tony Paatsch confirmed up to 20 students are standing in aisles when travelling at 80 to 100 kilometres an hour and said:

> While that's legal, we don't believe that's safe.

Parents report children sitting in stairwells. In Lara students are left stranded. In Fyansford families have no service. For over 10 days the department has ignored a proposed route adjustment to prevent students standing on buses travelling at 100 kilometres an hour. Both Mr Paatsch and Clonard College principal Luci Quinn are now calling for a full overhaul. Mayor of Greater Geelong Stretch Kontelj has written to the minister seeking immediate action, describing a 'systematic failure'. Yet the Labor member for Geelong Christine Couzens responded by saying:

> I think the mayor needs to focus on local government; there are plenty of issues he needs to deal with … let the state government get on with its processes of a review.

Meanwhile children are getting injured. That comment is astonishing and profoundly out of touch. At a time when a child has suffered a fractured jaw, when students are standing at highway speeds and when parents are pleading for urgent intervention, to tell the mayor to 'focus on local government' is dismissive and complacent. Worse still, schools do not appear to know about the review. Who is conducting it, who commissioned it and how is it taking place? Principal Paatsch has said:

> The schools want to contribute … we would love to be able to have our voice heard in that debate.

The action I seek is for the minister to immediately direct the department to implement urgent interim capacity increases on the worst affected routes, prohibit standing on high-speed regional school buses and take his colleague the member for Geelong to meet principals and affected families within the next fortnight. He should then report back to this house with a clear timetable for change. Minister, our students are standing at 100 kilometres an hour. They cannot afford to wait for your department to sit on its hands.

Ballarat saleyards site

Joe McCRACKEN (Western Victoria) (21:33): (2368) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts. It concerns the former Ballarat saleyards site on La Trobe Street, currently Ballarat's most successful open air dust storage facility. On 8 April 2025 a press release was triumphantly released, entitled 'Works to begin to restore and repurpose key sites'. That was 11 months ago. I appreciate that 11 months in government time can sometimes feel like

11 minutes, but to the people of Ballarat it suspiciously feels like 11 months. The *Australian* summed it up last week with the headline 'Ballarat's Commonwealth Games dream just a wasteland of broken promises' and for once no embellishment is required.

Ballarat was promised remediation works. We were promised that the land would be levelled off. Housing, jobs and a legacy were all promised. Instead, what we have got is a block of land that looks like it is auditioning for a low-budget post-apocalyptic film. Residents drive past daily wondering whether it is a development site or whether it is an interactive exhibit on government delivery. Bill Stolk from the Ballarat Residents and Ratepayers Association group called it an 'eyesore' and said it was urgently needing attention. He is correct. At the current rate of progress, the only growth industry on the site is weeds. Bruce Crawford described it as 'a huge disappointment for Ballarat' – again, correct. Then there is the signage – the sign suggests desperately needed low-cost housing may not be the priority it once was. So, what is it? Is it an employment precinct? Is it affordable housing? Is it a mixed-use hub? Or is it just a very expensive patch of dirt with excellent graphic design? At this pace, I suspect Gout Gout is probably going to run to the Los Angeles Olympics before the site reaches a practical use. Committee for Ballarat CEO Mike Poulton described the housing commitment as 'opaque', saying it is 'the new investment we just haven't seen'.

Opaque is being diplomatic – Ballarat residents might call it invisible. So the action I seek from the minister is simple: will you provide a clear and comprehensive timeline for remediation, planning, construction and delivery so the people of Ballarat know whether this site has a future or whether it is simply destined to remain the Commonwealth Games' most permanent legacy?

Protective services officers

Nick McGOWAN (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (21:36): (2369) My matter is for the Minister for Police. I would have everyone understand that over the weekend, you may have perhaps seen in the media some reference to our PSOs at train stations. Now, this is a much-treasured policy of those of us on this side of the house, because it was a very –

Bev McArthur interjected.

Nick McGOWAN: Well, there will be none left, that is right. It was a very fine policy because what it did was actually address the issue of the 1980s into the 1990s; we had lawfulness and all sorts of antisocial behaviour occurring right across the transport system.

Jacinta Ermacora interjected.

Nick McGOWAN: Unlawfulness – well picked up. That is right. There is very little lawfulness, unfortunately. But these days, of course, Labor has fixed that for us; you have just got complete unlawfulness.

Nonetheless, I digress from the latest policy approach of those opposite us, and that is to take PSOs off stations. We already know, because you have told us, that you are going to take PSOs off 120 stations.

Bev McArthur: How many stations are there?

Nick McGOWAN: There are quite a few. But they are going to remove PSOs permanently from 120 stations. Instead, they will be replaced with roving teams, which means they may be there from time to time, on a whim, a short minute's notice, perhaps passing by. They may not even get off the train. They might just look through the window.

Richard Welch interjected.

Nick McGOWAN: If you are lucky, you will get a wave. I jest, but the true nature of the problem starts to reveal itself, because of course the government is refusing to release the names of those stations. I did an FOI request on this.

A member interjected.

Nick McGOWAN: That is right: they are refusing to release it. I got the response to the FOI just recently, and you will be pleased to know that the minister's reason for not releasing this information to the public is because they want to provide it to the media, because they want to prioritise public safety. The prioritisation is of course the government's publicity. So what they want to do is give this story to the media first before they give it to the public. So the public –

Bev McArthur interjected.

Nick McGOWAN: They want to increase their followers. That is right. Come hell or high water, they are going to find one way or another to increase their followers. Instagram, Facebook, TikTok – you name it, whatever is their folly for the day.

Bev McArthur interjected.

Nick McGOWAN: That is right, they want to increase their followers whichever way they do it. But this is not a way to increase your followers. In all seriousness, what we need at our stations, what I need right across my community, in the local electorate of Ringwood – and whether I am talking about Blackburn train station, Mr Welch, or whether I am talking about Nunawading, Mitcham, Ringwood, Ringwood East, Heatherdale, Heathmont and right across the line and right across the metropolitan services in Victoria – is certainty. Certainty, which we need not least for our women, for our young girls, for our seniors, for those who have ability constraints, for women, for men, for boys, for everyone. Everyone needs to have certainty so that they know and can choose which station they get off at, because they know that this government have taken PSOs off 120 stations. So I ask the minister to produce those lists now so we do not have to spend another night not knowing which stations Victorians can safely disembark at and actually have a PSO present to take them to their car if they so need it.

Responses

Gayle TIERNEY (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Water) (21:39): There were 20 adjournment matters. All 20 will be referred to the relevant minister.

Questions without notice and ministers statements

Written responses

The PRESIDENT (21:39): Before we adjourn, I committed to Ms Crozier to review a response to a question from the Minister for Mental Health during question time. I have reviewed the transcript, and I will uphold Ms Crozier's point of order. Therefore, given the lateness of the day, I will require Ms Stitt to give a written response inside the standing orders, with an extra day on it.

The house stands adjourned.

House adjourned 9:40 pm.