

# **PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE**

## **Inquiry into the 2026–27 Budget Estimates**

Melbourne – Friday 15 May 2026

### **MEMBERS**

Sarah Connolly – Chair

John Pesutto – Deputy Chair

Jade Benham

Michael Galea

Mathew Hilakari

Lauren Kathage

Aiv Puglielli

Richard Riordan

Meng Heang Tak



## WITNESSES

Jacinta Allan, MP, Premier; and

Jeremi Moule, Secretary,

Jason Loos, Deputy Secretary, Economic Policy and State Productivity,

Dannii de Kretser, Deputy Secretary, Social Policy, and

Marian Chapman, Deputy Secretary, Public Administration, Department of Premier and Cabinet.

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

On behalf of the Parliament, the committee is conducting this Inquiry into the 2026–27 Budget Estimates. The committee's aim is to scrutinise public administration and finance to improve outcomes for the Victorian community.

I advise that all evidence taken by the committee today is protected by parliamentary privilege. However, comments repeated outside of this hearing may not be protected by this privilege.

All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard, and it is broadcast live on the Parliament's website. This broadcast includes automated captioning, and members and witnesses should be aware that all microphones are live during the hearings, and anything you say may be picked up, even if you say it really quietly.

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

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

I welcome the Premier of Victoria, the Honourable Jacinta Allan, as well as officials from the Department of Premier and Cabinet. Premier, I invite you to make an opening statement or presentation of no more than 10 minutes, and this will be followed by questions from the committee. Your time starts now.

### Visual presentation.

**Jacinta ALLAN:** Terrific. Thank you, Chair. Thanks to members of the committee for your time this afternoon and the opportunity to present to the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee the 2026–27 budget. It is a budget that we are really proud to present to you today, one that is focused on making life easier, safer, and more affordable for Victorians. Over the time for the presentation, I will take you through some of the key commitments that we have made, but also touch on the economic foundations on which this budget is set, how we are providing real and practical cost-of-living help for families and also continuing that approach that Labor governments always have: continuing to invest in health, in hospitals, in schools, safety and in regional Victoria as well.

That brings me to this first slide, which outlines details about the purpose of this budget. It comes at a time – and the budget is very much recognising the times that we are in – where families across the state are feeling some real pressures. A lot of that pressure is coming from a long way from here. It is coming from the Middle East, where Trump's war in the Middle East is, as we have seen since February, really driving up fuel costs. It is driving up global inflation. There are the pressures of tariffs, of wages not keeping pace. And whilst these are pressures that might have originated a long way from people's lives, they show up every day in people's lives, in the grocery bills, at the petrol pump, when you go to pay your rent or your mortgage repayments, in your power bills. The budget is in recognition that we have a role here to help – we cannot stop all of those global pressures, we cannot end war overseas, as much as we would wish to. But what we can do is not stand back, but rather lean in and help and support people at a time when they need real help, right now, but also to

continue to strengthen and protect the services that people rely on and then look to the future and make sure we are continuing to build for that future.

The reason why our budget can achieve these outcomes and can achieve that central purpose is because of the way that the economy has been managed responsibly. We have a strong and resilient economy here in Victoria. If you look at some of the statistics that bear that out: over the past decade Victoria's economy has grown faster than any other state in the country. It is estimated today to be 15 per cent larger in real terms than it was before the pandemic in 2020. Also over that period of time, business investment has grown by more than 44 per cent. Not only is that a good number on its own, it is also the strongest growth in the nation. And of course more business investment means more jobs, which brings me to that next really important number, where in the last three years 300,000 more Victorians have found work. Again, if you are looking at jurisdictional comparisons, that is a higher percentage than the rest of the nation. Also we have had 123,000 new businesses that have been created since 2020. Those three economic indicators alone show you that our economy is strong, as I said, and it is resilient. It also too gives us the opportunity to build on that foundation, which we have done in this budget.

The budget – and I am sure the Treasurer went through this with you this morning – confirms Victoria's first surplus in seven years. We have that forecast surplus of \$727 million this year, surpluses averaging \$1.7 billion over the forward estimates and debt declining as a share of the economy. Again, if we are wanting to make a jurisdictional comparison, that surplus that is being delivered, we are the only government on the eastern seaboard, federal or state, to be delivering a surplus through our budget. What all of this means too is, and this is really important to us, this strength of the economy, a growing economy, gives us choices – choices to both help families now, as I said, to provide real help when they need it, to continue to grow and back jobs and also to keep building and continue to invest in the services that people rely on.

I will quickly move through some of the key highlights here, whether it is through the sustained investment that we have made in the infrastructure we need, and we have made a choice to invest today in productive infrastructure that both delivers benefits today through the jobs that it creates – the opening of the Metro Tunnel and the 1200 additional weekly services that are here today – but also it means that future generations can have the benefit of that investment. We have got the 121 new schools that have opened up since 2019, the new Footscray Hospital and the Peninsula University Hospital in Frankston. I have mentioned the Metro Tunnel and West Gate Tunnel, and 88 level crossings have been removed. These are all, as I said, investments that we are making today that have that long-term benefit, but there are also those benefits today too about making life work for families, whether it is extra train services, easing congestion or better connecting regional communities in and out of Melbourne and to each other. Again, this sort of infrastructure is productive for our economy. The easier it is for people and goods to move around, the better it is for our economy. And of course we have got future investments ahead in projects like the North East Link, airport rail, Sunshine superhub, Chair, and the Suburban Rail Loop.

I hope to have an opportunity during the course of the hearing to go into some more details about the different areas of focus for our budget. There is helping to make life easier for families. Cost of living is incredibly important, so too is, as I have touched on, how do we make our transport system work for everyone. There is, for example, the work on that last line there, the \$103 million for new and upgraded roads across metropolitan Melbourne and regional Victoria.

As well as investing in some of those bigger projects, these local projects are also really important to upgrade intersections, put in traffic lights and upgrade slip lanes alongside that big investment that we are making of over a billion dollars in road maintenance. It is the biggest investment that we have made, and it brings it to nearly \$3 billion in three budgets that we have invested in road maintenance. There is help with cost of living, help right now because people need it right now. If you go back to the start of my presentation, we have got the capacity in our budget through the decisions we have taken – oh, sorry, I am on communities that are safe. I am very keen clearly to talk about the cost of living. We might come back to that.

Communities that are safe is also something that has been very important to us. We already have the largest policing force in the nation, and we continue to back and grow our police force and the work of the chief commissioner. We do so because community safety is so incredibly important to us. That is why you will see in the budget there is backing the chief commissioner's work with bringing on more police reservists and more PSOs and there is also that really important work for the future around crime prevention, which is centred on the violence reduction unit. The budget invests \$33 million into the violence reduction unit, really zeroing in on

localised prevention initiatives, which includes, for example, Victoria's first gang intervention program. That is based on a model that has worked in New York. We have got other programs that use lived-experience mentors as well, which is all looking at how we can get into the root causes of some of this behaviour that is causing concern in the community and then also backing that important work of Victoria Police.

If we can turn to the next slide, that is about making life more affordable for families. We are doing this, as you can see there, through investments in housing. This is particularly important because we know this is a real challenge for so many families, and it has been a pretty hot topic in recent days as well. Housing is providing families with the ability to have the dignity of a roof over their head, and that is why you can see we continue to support the Social Housing Growth Fund. We have got support for families and kids. I hope too, later on in our conversation at this committee, to have more of a discussion about that really critical work that food relief agencies are doing. There is just more and more pressure coming into our food relief agencies. They are reporting more and more demand, which is why we continue to fund and support them, and again it is a reflection of the times that we are in that they are seeing more and more people seek their support and help.

I am just keeping an eye on the time – we might whip through the last ones of these. There is help for our kids in our education system. I very much look forward to coming back and talking more about how not only this budget backing our schools with education and with schools infrastructure, we are backing our teachers as well, and we will have some a lot more to say about that over the course of the afternoon as well. Then there is that great work in early childhood education.

I mentioned earlier this budget is about making sure that we can invest in schools but also in hospitals. This year's budget provides \$32 billion into our health system. That is bigger than the amount we invested last year. It is a significant investment, because access to good public health care is just so central to how our community can function and how our economy can work and is a really important underpinning of our society, which is why we continue to invest.

I think I am going to run out of time to tell you how fabulous regional Victoria is. I know there are some members on the committee here who will agree with me, and I am sure we will have the opportunity to discuss that in a moment.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much, Premier. We are going to go to Ms Benham.

**Jade BENHAM:** Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon, Premier and officials. We are referring to the 'Department Performance Statement', page 118, which covers the outputs. Premier, your government actively promotes programs encouraging young women and schoolgirls to enter construction and work on Big Build sites. In light of the article this morning in the *Age*, can you guarantee to Victorian parents that teenage girls participating in these programs were never exposed to exploitation, grooming or unsafe environments involving violent offenders and domestic violence perpetrators that infiltrated the Big Build worksites?

**Jacinta ALLAN:** I appreciate the question and the opportunity to say very clearly to the committee and to the broader community that those allegations that have been reported on today – and I do acknowledge there have been previous allegations that have been made about the treatment of women on worksites – are appalling. It is disgusting, and it is behaviour for which I have absolutely no tolerance. It sits against that broader backdrop of work that we have done to strengthen the powers of Victoria Police and the Labour Hire Authority to be able to get into these worksites and, where there are allegations of illegal behaviour, address, investigate and take action. It is why I can share with you today that police have laid 88 criminal charges already. It is why

**Jade BENHAM:** Premier, sorry, I will interrupt you there. Also, Geoffrey Watson, who had the report that this first started to become exposed in, at least to the public anyway, has said that referring to police is akin to perpetuating a cover-up because Victoria Police at this point do not have the powers to investigate these matters. So I find that invalid. But getting back to my original question, can you guarantee to Victorian parents that teenage girls were not exposed?

**Jacinta ALLAN:** No, I am just going to pick up on that reference that has been made to Victoria Police. We have here in Victoria an independent investigative body with all the powers and tools that it needs, and we have strengthened those powers in recent times to investigate illegal criminal behaviour, which I find unacceptable and the broader Victorian community finds absolutely unacceptable. So I take a different view to that of

Mr Watson. I do have confidence in Victoria Police to investigate and to bring to account criminal behaviour, and if there is a proof point of that, it is the fact that they have laid 88 charges as a result of their investigation, so I think –

**Jade BENHAM:** So when was the first time you heard about this morning's allegations then?

**Jacinta ALLAN:** You referenced some previous allegations that had been made earlier this year. And again, I have been consistent in having absolute zero tolerance. It is just abhorrent behaviour.

**Jade BENHAM:** Did you know about Women in Construction?

**Jacinta ALLAN:** Well, the Women in Construction program, yes, I did know about the Women in Construction program.

**Jade BENHAM:** Did you know who was the manager of that program?

**Jacinta ALLAN:** And the Women in Construction program was established to bring more women into worksites, to give more women opportunities to work in the industry –

**Jade BENHAM:** Premier, did the management of that company –

**Jacinta ALLAN:** If I can –

**Jade BENHAM:** not raise any red flags with either yourself or anyone within the department? This is a really serious matter.

**The CHAIR:** Excuse me. Ms Benham, it is one question at a time, and please afford the Premier the courtesy of answering your question. She is genuinely trying to answer it, and the evidence she is providing is important to the inquiry before us.

**Jacinta ALLAN:** These are, as I have said and I will just repeat, deeply serious allegations. They are deeply distressing. We just were having a conversation – I hope you do not mind me referring to the fact – that we have teenage daughters. Like, I do not want any mother or father of any girl or woman working on a worksite to have concerns, which is why –

**Jade BENHAM:** Would you let your daughter participate in a program like this, Premier?

**Jacinta ALLAN:** In terms of what my daughter chooses to do, I will respect her independent choice as a young woman to enter the profession she wants to choose.

**Jade BENHAM:** With Women in Construction, though?

**Jacinta ALLAN:** What my responsibility is is to ensure that our investigative agencies and the oversight architecture that sits over worksites in this state have the tools and the powers that they need to investigate criminal behaviour – allegations of criminal behaviour that we find so disgraceful and appalling. And if there is further evidence, that absolutely must be referred to Victoria Police. A proof point of that is the 88 charges. Further to that, I believe the Treasurer may have gone to this earlier today. If not, I can provide this information now to the committee. As a result –

**Jade BENHAM:** No, I only have a couple of minutes left.

**Michael GALEA:** Do you not want the answer?

**Jade BENHAM:** I really want to ask, I really need a question to: when was the first time you heard about this morning's allegation concerning Women in Construction?

**Jacinta ALLAN:** Well, again, I would need to check some previous reporting from earlier this year, but the allegations of potential illegal behaviour on worksites has been reported on previously –

**Jade BENHAM:** With this company?

**Jacinta ALLAN:** and I have been consistent in saying that where there have been allegations that have been made they should be immediately referred. And if I can just finish – because this is an important point to addressing your concerns, and I accept broader concerns about this sort of behaviour, concerns that I share – we have strengthened the powers of the Labour Hire Authority. The Labour Hire Authority, as a result of the work they have been doing, have already cancelled 151 construction licences. They have blocked a further 48. And when it comes to this particular company, they have started a process about not renewing this company's licence.

**Jade BENHAM:** Are they still working on Big Build sites right now?

**Jacinta ALLAN:** So that is a process that I would have to refer you to the Labour Hire Authority for that answer.

**Jade BENHAM:** Sorry, Premier, just to go back, you said that you had received advice earlier in the year when these allegations had started to come out. Are we able to sight that advice?

**Jacinta ALLAN:** No, I did not say that. I did not say that.

**Jade BENHAM:** When I asked when was the first time you heard about this morning's allegations –

**Jacinta ALLAN:** I said allegations similar to those that have been reported today have been previously made.

**Jade BENHAM:** Great. Are we able to sight that advice?

**Jacinta ALLAN:** I refer you to reporting earlier this year.

**Jade BENHAM:** Are we able to sight that advice?

**Jacinta ALLAN:** I am answering your questions when you asked about when I was made aware of reports.

**Jade BENHAM:** But if you had received advice from the department or from advisers about these allegations that are, again, very serious –

**Jacinta ALLAN:** In terms of allegations, I have been clear and consistent on this matter for some time in having absolute zero tolerance for this behaviour. It is abhorrent. Any illegal activity on any worksite is unacceptable. The allegations particularly around elements of the construction industry are particularly so. And that is why on previous occasions when allegations have been made, they have been referred. And you can see as a result now of further action that we have taken – and if I can just spend a moment on that – we now have today a very different architecture –

**Jade BENHAM:** Sorry, in the interests of time, I have got 10 seconds left.

**Jacinta ALLAN:** That is not what is on the clock there.

**The CHAIR:** You have not got 10 seconds left, Ms Benham. You have got about 10 minutes.

**Jade BENHAM:** I cannot see it from here. My time is telling me –

**The CHAIR:** I suggest you have been here long enough, Ms Benham, to set your own clock. This clock is for the officials.

**Jade BENHAM:** Good. Okay.

**The CHAIR:** You have got just under 10 minutes.

**Jade BENHAM:** Okay. Can I ask then, going back to advice that you have received about other allegations, did you refer on those allegations and those concerns immediately?

**Jacinta ALLAN:** I have said previously – I have answered this on a number of occasions in both the Parliament and in other forums – when allegations were made of behaviour that I find unacceptable they were

referred to the relevant agencies. Further to that, the work that we have done since mid-2024 means that we now have in place an architecture that has a stronger zero tolerance framework around this behaviour. As a result of the actions we have taken, not only do Victoria Police and the Labour Hire Authority have more powers, they are using those powers to lay more charges and cancel more licences. Whistleblowers now have a protected pathway through which they can raise these concerns and claims.

**Jade BENHAM:** So, Premier, are any of these –

**Jacinta ALLAN:** We now require construction companies –

**Jade BENHAM:** Sorry, in the interests of time again, are any of these criminals currently active on the Big Build?

**Jacinta ALLAN:** We now require construction companies – and this goes to your question as you were cutting across me – where concerns or matters of illegal behaviour are raised with them and they are responsible for the operation of these construction sites, they are required –

**Jade BENHAM:** We understand that, and you have repeated that often, but we want to know if any of these criminals that were named this morning are currently active on Big Build sites.

**Jacinta ALLAN:** That would be a matter for Victoria Police to investigate, as I have said before –

**Jade BENHAM:** How many criminal organisations are still active in the Big Build?

**Jacinta ALLAN:** And again, we have strengthened Victoria Police's powers around going after organised crime in this state. We have strengthened the architecture, and this is going to your question before. Where construction companies either see, suspect or have reported to them concerns about illegal behaviour, they are required now under their contractual arrangements to report that. What we also have – and this is a particularly important outcome of the work done by Greg Wilson and the independent review, of which we have accepted all recommendations – is that there is now an alliance in place, a formal framework in place, that covers Victoria Police, federal police, the Labour Hire Authority and the Fair Work Commission as well. This is important because a number of these elements go to the relationship between the contractor and the subcontractor and how those enterprise agreements are struck, which is why there is now a formal alliance –

**Jade BENHAM:** Sorry, I will pull you up there, because I do have a question about that.

**Jacinta ALLAN:** No, if I could just –

**Jade BENHAM:** Do you have any knowledge about the LXP instructing its contracting partners to take on as trainees any workers from Women in Construction?

**Jacinta ALLAN:** I would have to get you to refer that to the relevant agency. That is not information that I hold.

**Jade BENHAM:** So you do not know. That is okay. Did the LXP receive any formal –

**The CHAIR:** Excuse me, Ms Benham, the Premier did not say she did not know.

**Jacinta ALLAN:** No.

**The CHAIR:** She responded to your question.

**Jacinta ALLAN:** That question goes exactly to the point I was making just before, which is we have now changed the rules. We have changed the contracts. Any contractor who is responsible for these work sites as contracted by the government is required to report any concern or allegation that is raised with them about criminal behaviour on their work sites. That is a requirement, and that requirement to report to Victoria Police means that Victoria Police with their strengthened powers has now laid, as I said before, 88 charges. So there is a very different –

**Jade BENHAM:** Coming back to that point, Premier – sorry, I have very limited time – did the LXP receive any formal warnings from its contracting partners that it was being forced to use WIC by the CFMEU?

**Jacinta ALLAN:** I would have to refer you to that agency for that question. But I repeat: the architecture that we now have in place requires any allegations of this nature to be reported. And as we have seen as a result of the additional powers that have been given to Victoria Police – the additional powers that have been given, too, to the Labour Hire Authority –

The Labour Hire Authority was set up in 2018. It was set up in opposition. It was opposed through the Parliament by the Liberal–National parties. When we went to strengthen the powers of the Labour Hire Authority last year, that was also opposed by you and your colleagues.

**Jade BENHAM:** So do the Labour Hire Authority do any background checks?

**Jacinta ALLAN:** As a result though of the work that has been done, in terms of evidence and proof point of the work of the Labour Hire Authority, they have blocked 48 licence applications for businesses in the construction industry.

**Jade BENHAM:** So they do background checks, just not on this company.

**Jacinta ALLAN:** They have cancelled 151 licences, and as an independent agency –

**The CHAIR:** Excuse me, there is a point of order. There is too much interjection going on.

**Michael GALEA:** On a point of order, Chair, it is hard to know who is asking the questions. I believe the Premier is responding to Ms Benham, and I cannot hear answers for the other opposition members interjecting.

**The CHAIR:** Ms Benham, one question at a time.

**Jade BENHAM:** Do the Labour Hire Authority, before they approve a licence, do background checks? In particular, did they do a background check on Women in Construction?

**Jacinta ALLAN:** Let us go back a step. The Labour Hire Authority is an independent agency. We have strengthened the powers of that agency, and as a result of the work that that agency has done, they have cancelled 151 licences and blocked a further 48 licences. That is evidence of the zero tolerance that we have as a government and how we have strengthened the architecture around this industry. That means that whether you are a whistleblower or a construction company, there are requirements about how information is reported that is investigated by Victoria Police with strengthened powers. We have zero tolerance for this behaviour. It is serious criminal behaviour, and allegations of this, if there is evidence of this, should be immediately referred to Victoria Police. and we have our agencies with the tools and powers to do just that.

**Jade BENHAM:** Thank you, Premier. We are very familiar with the policy changes. Given all those numbers that you just mentioned, how did this company slip through all of those rejections and checks? You have a cohort of criminal violent offenders working with women, and the mere fact, given your equity policy, that Women in Construction is led by a cohort of violent offenders, men – did that not raise any red flags with you or your department?

**Jacinta ALLAN:** Again, the nature of the individuals in this instance – a program that is set up to bring more women into the construction industry is something –

**Jade BENHAM:** Led by violent men.

**Jacinta ALLAN:** And those allegations are deeply, deeply concerning. Clearly these are matters that have already been raised with the Labour Hire Authority, which is –

**Richard RIORDAN:** They have not done anything about it.

**Jacinta ALLAN:** That is incorrect. They have already taken action to notify the relevant procurement agencies of a notice of intention to refuse this company's application to renew their labour hire licence, again, using powers that were opposed by you and your colleagues – an agency that was opposed by you and your colleagues. We have zero tolerance for this behaviour.

**Jade BENHAM:** If they have received notice not to renew it, have they cancelled it? And is Women in Construction still active on Big Build sites?

**Jacinta ALLAN:** Those are matters that I would have to refer you, in terms of their immediate activity, to those relevant agencies for.

**Jade BENHAM:** Do you know, though, Premier?

**Jacinta ALLAN:** I have just answered your question.

**Jade BENHAM:** Okay. Thank you. Secretary, did DPC receive any briefings from VIDA, DTP, the Labour Hire Authority, Vic Police, IBAC, WorkSafe or the Fair Work Commission about Women in Construction, Rock Solid Civil or any of those related entities?

**Jeremi MOULE:** Not that I am aware of.

**Jade BENHAM:** Great. I want to go now to the Southern Program Alliance. Did the Level Crossing Removal Project ever collect formal reporting from the Southern Program Alliance that they were forced by the CFMEU to remove existing labour hire and instead use Women in Construction?

**Jacinta ALLAN:** Sorry, who is that question for?

**Jade BENHAM:** I am happy for the Premier to answer; I am happy for the Secretary to answer.

**Jeremi MOULE:** So your question was: did they? Or: was that reported to DPC? Which was the way that you phrased it previous –

**Jade BENHAM:** Did the Level Crossing Removal Project ever collect any formal reporting from the Southern Program Alliance that said that they were forced by the CFMEU to use Women in Construction?

**The CHAIR:** Apologies, Ms Benham, you are out of time. I am going to go to Mr Galea.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon, Premier, Secretary and officials. Thank you for joining us. Premier, you highlighted in your presentation the importance of cost-of-living relief for Victorians right now, and in particular it is also referred to in budget paper 2, page 16, which also discusses how the ongoing conflict in the Middle East is driving uncertainty, especially for fuel prices. Premier, what is the government doing in this budget to help Victorians who are feeling those pressures and those uncertainties with petrol prices?

**Jacinta ALLAN:** Thank you, Mr Galea, for your question and shared focus on helping working people and Victorian families dealing with some of the real pressures that are being experienced every single day. I went to some of this earlier in my presentation. But we also know, in this current climate, particularly since Donald Trump's war in Iran has really elevated the pressures, elevated the cost of fuel, the inflationary impacts. We also know it comes at a time when there were families already feeling under pressure as a result of both time and the rising costs. That is why we have made a decision as a government that we can use the position that we have got in terms of our budget capacity to look at where we can help people – where we can use some of the levers of government to be able to help people with some of these pressures.

That is why, on two particular measures, we have looked at doing two temporary targeted cost-of-living measures. That comes against a backdrop of a broader range of things that we already have in place, but it is about adding a couple of targeted temporary measures reflecting the times and the challenges of the times. The first of course is making public transport free for the month of April. We are now into May. We have extended it through to the end of May, and we have also announced that we will make it half-price for the rest of the year. Just to be clear, this is public transport right across the state – trains, trams, buses right across the state. We are seeing people respond by using our public transport system, and I think this does speak to the fact that families are watching every dollar. They are watching every dollar really closely, and where they have got the ability to save some money – because that is money that, I should say, whilst they might be saving it off public transport, is going into groceries, is going into the mortgage, is going into their power bills. It is a temporary measure, but I should also point out that it comes following work in last year's budget, where we made public

transport free for all kids under the age of 18. I hope everyone's kids under the age of 18 have got their Myki card and are using their youth Myki –

**Richard RIORDAN:** It does not work in the country, Premier.

**Jacinta ALLAN:** Well, my kids are happy with mine.

*Members interjecting.*

**Jacinta ALLAN:** Chair, I will not resist the interjection from the member for Polwarth. I remind him that as a result of significant work we have done to upgrade the Warrnambool line, there are now five daily return services of quicker trains, more modern trains on a line that was neglected and privatised by a former Liberal–National government. But I do digress. If the member for Polwarth wants to make this a conversation about the neglect of his train line by his party, I will absolutely enjoy that, but that would not be answering Mr Galea's question of course. But it is about –

*Members interjecting.*

**The CHAIR:** Excuse me. The committee cares about the answer, Mr Riordan.

**Jacinta ALLAN:** I guess this sort of response, Chair and Mr Galea, is no surprise, because I was going to move on and talk about car rego, which those opposite have opposed and have described as a hoax. It is these sorts of targeted measures that are really needed by families, and they should not be made a mockery of in the way members of this committee are doing, because as I said, they are saving families some precious dollars that are going into their grocery bill. That is why the free public transport for kids, which is where I think we diverted from, has been a really important saving measure, saving what could be hundreds or indeed thousands of dollars, depending on the number of kids in your families.

When I am talking about public transport fares and charges, I should also remind the committee – not that some will need reminding – that it was a couple of years ago that our government slashed regional fares, slashed them massively, to be the same as a metropolitan price, giving regional passengers equity with metropolitan prices and saving families significant funds. Of course we could do all of this because we have added substantially to our regional train network, as we have to our metropolitan network as well.

Also, whilst talking about some targeted support, I should refer to the work that states and territories have done with the Commonwealth government around the three-month reduction in the fuel excise. Again, that has taken some immediate pressure off, and if you particularly go back and remember that spike in prices during that February–March period, it came at a time when people were certainly needing some relief at the bowser. But I also did mention that there are – and I outlined some of this earlier – a number of other activities that we are doing in the healthcare space to help make access to health care cheaper and more affordable for families. There are the urgent care clinics, the free urgent care clinics, and the member for Yan Yean and I were at the Mernda one the other day, talking about the benefit that that has made; the free virtual emergency department, which I know the member for Yan Yean also has used on previous occasions; and then there is Chemist Care Now as well, which is where you can go and get a whole range of things, a script for a whole range of conditions, at the chemist without having to go to a GP.

Also too there are a range of cost-of-living supports that we are delivering in our school settings, because that is also a really great way that we can provide support, whether it is the Glasses for Kids, which we have added to in this year's budget; the school breakfast clubs, which is again an area where there has been such growing demand; and also the policy change – that has been a really important one – about the uniforms, taking the logos off pants and shorts and socks, which again has made a real difference in helping families save money on their school uniforms.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you, Premier. You did speak about how free public transport is of course statewide. There are some Victorians who rely on their cars more than others, so that is particularly why, and I think you did touch on this as well, the 20 per cent rebate on rego – which people I have been out speaking with in my community are absolutely rapt with. The funding that is provided in BP3, page 83, of just over \$758 million over this financial year and next, can you please talk to me in further detail about this initiative, how it will operate and provide that relief for Victorians?

**Jacinta ALLAN:** Absolutely. The car rego is recognising that for some people public transport is a great option. Others, for various reasons, will need to rely on their motor vehicle. That is why we have added to that temporary targeted cost-of-living help right now, recognising that the global conflicts and pressures that are putting pressures on household budgets are why we are delivering that one-off 20 per cent off car registration – and it is not just for one car, it is for two cars. That means it is up to \$186 for one car and \$372 for two vehicles that are registered to the family household.

Again, this is immediate support. I will be opening up the opportunity over the month of June through the Service Vic app, and I hope everyone can get through the Services Vic app to be able to take up that opportunity. We estimate there are around 4 million light passenger vehicles that are registered in Victoria, so it is for cars, it is for utes, it is also for motorbikes as well. That is a question I get a lot when I am out and about: does it cover motorbikes? The answer is it absolutely does.

**Michael GALEA:** Excellent. Thank you, Premier. To come back to public transport, there is also an initiative for more train services, which will particularly benefit the north-eastern suburbs, the eastern suburbs, as well as extra carriages on the Wyndham Vale branch – that is adding carriages, not cutting them – and more services on the Shepparton line. Can you talk to me about how those investments, combined with the BP4 investments into an additional 25 X'trapolis 2.0 trains, are going to help meet this increased demand on rail services that you referred to in your previous answer?

**Jacinta ALLAN:** I might start there with the additional 25 X'trapolis 2.0 trains. We build the rail infrastructure, we duplicate the track, we build new train lines to add extra services and of course we need the new rolling stock to be able to deliver those services. A key difference between us and previous Liberal–National governments is that we have made sure that these trains are made here in Melbourne and Victoria. In the case of the X'traps, our colleague the member for Wendouree would be very keen to remind us that a large part of that manufacturing happens in her community, at the railway workshops in Ballarat.

That is a really good example of how you can support jobs in our rail network through the construction work and you can support jobs in regional communities by having deliberate policy settings. We deliberately require it. Trains are made in Ballarat, they are made in Melbourne and Victoria because that is where we tell the companies they have to be made through our local content requirements. That is having a real positive impact on the jobs and the pay packets in those communities that rely on it. I remember a very different time when railway workshops in regional areas were privatised, starved of work and shut down by a previous Liberal–National government who did not believe in this approach – well, we do. And that is where you get the double benefit: you get the jobs in these communities, you get the new brand new trains for passengers to enjoy. And of course they are being used for the additional services that you referred to. That can only be achieved through the work program that I have outlined.

You have mentioned the Wyndham Vale line, and I know the member for Laverton has interest in that part of the world as well.

**The CHAIR:** A very big interest.

**Jacinta ALLAN:** There are the bigger trains that will be running on the Wyndham Vale line. What does that mean? It gives you 50 per cent more capacity in peak times, so more seats, more space for more passengers. We have also got more to come with more services on the Werribee, Sandringham, Craigieburn and Upfield lines. Again this speaks to why you need the additional rolling stock, because you are running more services.

If I could just touch for a moment or two on the Shepparton line, I am really excited to see that we are coming to the point where, after a long program of works that has been delivered by our Labor government, the Shepparton community is getting the nine daily return services that it has so longed for. We have done this a bit like on the Warrnambool line as well, where we have done it in sections of work where we have upgraded track, duplicated track, bought new trains. This is going to be a significant outcome for the Shepparton community where they are getting those extra trains. Shepparton is a big, vibrant regional centre, and it has taken a Labor government to deliver that rail upgrade. I should also give a shout-out to the former Independent member for Shepparton, who worked so hard to deliver that outcome. I will acknowledge the current member for Shepparton, when she was the mayor of Shepparton, had been supportive, but it was the Independent member for Shepparton who worked with our government to bring that about.

This is how you bring together all the moving parts about delivering a strong, modern train service and train network, whether you are in metropolitan areas or for our regional communities. We have that underpinning approach. Not only is rail a great way to move around our city and state – we have made it free for kids; I should also have mentioned that we have made it free for carers and seniors on weekends as well – but also there is that point I made about the rolling stock being made here in Melbourne and Victoria, because that is local manufacturing jobs, jobs that are here in Victoria because we require them to be here in Victoria. You get that by having that commitment to the manufacturing sector, the policy settings that are in place to drive that outcome, which supports jobs around the state.

**Michael GALEA:** Absolutely. And good to see – I was not there – lots of great gunzel videos on YouTube from the launch of the X'trapolis 2.0s two weekends ago. Premier, you did refer to the Servo Saver feature of the Service Victoria app just before as well. BP3, page 44, outlines that \$4.1 million in funding for the delivery of the fair fuel plan. Obviously we know the benefits of being able to use Servo Saver on your phone to get the lowest price wherever you may be, but what will this funding do in terms of actually enforcing and requiring service station operators to do the right thing, report their data appropriately and make sure that Victorians are getting the best value for money?

**Jacinta ALLAN:** Thank you. This has been another really timely cost-of-living measure that we already had in place, but as it was coming to its implementation at precisely the time where Donald Trump's war in Iran was pushing the price of fuel up, it has been a really important measure for two things: to be able to help motorists see where the lowest price is in their local community and also of course – that point that you made – to limit any price-gouging practice by having that price set for a 24-hour period. Many motorists would know the feeling: you drive past a servo in the morning, you go, 'Oh, I'll go and fill up later in the day', and later in the day the price has gone up. Well, we are setting the price for a 24-hour period, and all of this information is available through the Servo Saver app on the Service Vic site.

Again, as you say, it is part of our fair fuel plan. I remember talking about this fair fuel plan when I was with the member for Werribee talking to a family in Mambourin in the outer west. They are a young family who were in the hospitality industry with a couple of venues in the west and one on the other side of the Yarra, so doing a lot of travel, and the woman of the family mentioned she expected that the Servo Saver app was saving her family up to \$100 a week. That was their personal experience, because they were travelling a lot.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Fifty-two cents a litre – the difference right now on Servo Saver in that part of the world.

**Jacinta ALLAN:** Yes. And that information is at your fingertips; you do not have to go searching around for it. Can I say there has been a great response from the industry as well. I was with the member for Eureka in Bacchus Marsh a couple of weeks ago, and we popped into the local servo to get a cold drink. We were chatting to the service station manager, who was talking to us about the app. He was wanting to get some information on how he could engage with it more easily in terms of putting the information on there. Everyone wants to do the right thing, so the Servo Saver is really helping to achieve that, but I will say we have got some penalties in place if venues are not complying with the requirements that we have in place, because now is not the time that we want to see any kind of price-gouging behaviour. Prices are already high enough, and you will have noticed – and maybe Mr Hilakari has got this at his fingertips as well – that there has been an addition recently of the highest price that has been added to the Servo Saver.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** That is how it is so easy to work out. It is like a quarter difference.

**Michael GALEA:** A big red bar.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** It is amazing. Sorry, Mr Galea.

**Jacinta ALLAN:** So it is, again, a way of putting some downward pressure on those prices. We have had more than 479,000 Victorians who have used the Servo Saver app, and perhaps through the many, many people watching PAEC this afternoon, Chair, if anyone is not using the Servo Saver app, we would love people to get on the app and use it, because it is a great way of saving people money and time.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you, Premier.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr Galea. Deputy Chair.

**John PESUTTO:** Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon, Premier and officials. Premier, could I just quickly begin – you were speaking in your exchange with Ms Benham earlier about the article in the *Age* today. Would you agree that the work done by Nick McKenzie and his colleagues at the *Age* is important and effective work and without it we would not know about these important matters?

**Michael GALEA:** Is that a budget reference?

**John PESUTTO:** No, it was in the discussion. It was discussed earlier.

**Jacinta ALLAN:** I will take your advice, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** I will allow the question.

**Jacinta ALLAN:** In terms of identifying where there are allegations of illegal criminal behaviour in workplaces, it is absolutely an important part of the work that we now have in place here. I mentioned before the new architecture that we have in place.

**John PESUTTO:** No, but – excuse me, Premier – was the work of the journalist and his colleagues –

**Jacinta ALLAN:** I have already acknowledged that. I did acknowledge that.

**John PESUTTO:** It is important work and effective work?

**Jacinta ALLAN:** I did acknowledge that it was an important part of identifying in workplaces –

**John PESUTTO:** It was not part of your government's policy though. That is fair.

**The CHAIR:** Deputy Chair, allow the Premier to answer your question. I have allowed the question.

**Jacinta ALLAN:** You can go to your next question now.

**John PESUTTO:** Okay. Given that it is important work, and I think we agree on that, why didn't your government identify this conduct on worksites? Why did it take a journalist to do it?

**Jacinta ALLAN:** I will take your guidance, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** Deputy Chair, you are going to have to draw the question back to the inquiry at hand, including how it goes to the budget.

**Jacinta ALLAN:** If it assists the Deputy Chair, I can perhaps – I appreciate he has not got a budget paper reference at hand. I made it very clear both earlier in this hearing and on any number of previous occasions that any allegation of criminal behaviour in any worksite, but particularly on those construction industry worksites, is unacceptable. I have no tolerance for allegations of criminal behaviour. I have said on previous occasions that when allegations had been raised, they were referred to the relevant agencies for a response. I have also said on a number of occasions that following that reporting that you referred to just in your previous question there was further action that we have taken in that context of having absolutely no tolerance for this behaviour. What we have in place now as a result –

**John PESUTTO:** Okay, Premier.

**Jacinta ALLAN:** No. You have asked the question. I will go through the answer because it may assist in your next question. What we now have in place is a substantially strengthened zero-tolerance architecture, where in terms of allegations that may be being made of behaviour on worksites that is unacceptable, there are whistleblower protections in place. There are requirements for construction contractors to report.

**John PESUTTO:** Well, can I ask you about that, Premier? Forgive me, but can I ask, in the interests of time

**The CHAIR:** Allow the Premier to finish.

**Jacinta ALLAN:** There are also additional powers that have been given to police and the Labour Hire Authority. So strong action has been taken that reflects the absolute zero tolerance that we have for this behaviour. As a result of that strong action, Victoria Police, who are the independent investigative agency who have the powers to investigate organised crime, criminal behaviour and corrupt behaviour on these sites, have taken action.

**John PESUTTO:** Premier, I think I have allowed enough leeway. Can I please proceed?

**Jacinta ALLAN:** They have taken action that has resulted in 88 charges.

*Members interjecting.*

**Jacinta ALLAN:** With all due respect to the Deputy Chair, I am not sure, because we have said this a couple of times today already, and I do not think you can dismiss the work of Victoria Police that easily. I do not, and I am hoping that you do not either.

**John PESUTTO:** No-one is. Can I therefore –

*Members interjecting.*

**The CHAIR:** Excuse me with the interjections. Enough of the interjections. Deputy Chair, bring it back to the budget, please.

**John PESUTTO:** I am now working off the answer the Premier has just given.

**The CHAIR:** Deputy Chair, you will provide a budget reference. Bring it back the budget before us. Thank you.

**John PESUTTO:** BP4, 78.

**Jacinta ALLAN:** BP4, page 78?

**John PESUTTO:** Yes. Premier, can I put it to you –

**Jacinta ALLAN:** Can I just check that?

**John PESUTTO:** While you are doing that, Premier, I will state the question.

*Members interjecting.*

**John PESUTTO:** I put it to you, Premier, that your Wilson review, in light of serious allegations of –

*Members interjecting.*

**John PESUTTO:** In light of the serious allegations that prompted the Wilson review, in light of all the legislative changes your government has brought in since, none of it was effective to stop the corruption we saw with Women in Construction and Rock Solid Civil. Doesn't this prove that none of those changes were effective, and it took a journalist to disclose further wrongdoing that remains current on worksites today?

*Members interjecting.*

**The CHAIR:** Now, Premier, on that question, Deputy Chair, there has been a point of order, and when a point of order is raised, unfortunately, it needs to be raised and I need to hear it.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** On a point of order, Chair, the reference that the member has made is to 'Greener Government Buildings', which is BP4, page 78. I am not sure what that has got to do with his current line of questioning.

**John PESUTTO:** It is completed projects.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Yes. Greener Government Buildings is one of those. What project are you talking about?

**Jade BENHAM:** The entire Big Build is funded by the budget. That is what it is referring to.

**John PESUTTO:** Let us not split hairs.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** If you could relate it to the budget. It is budget estimates.

**The CHAIR:** I am going to rule on the point of order. I say there is no point of order. You can ask your question again. The purpose of these hearings, Deputy Chair, is to ask the Premier and witnesses here today questions about the budget before us and afford them the opportunity to respond. Their response forms part of the report that is then tabled in Parliament. Now, if you have a question, please ask the Premier, as opposed to commentary.

**John PESUTTO:** I will proceed, Chair. Premier, can I return to the southern project alliance, which Ms Benham was asking you and your officials at the end of her session. Did the Level Crossing Removal Project ever report from the southern project alliance that they were forced by the CFMEU to remove existing labour hire and instead use Women in Construction?

**Jacinta ALLAN:** Well, that is a very serious allegation. In terms of the information that was relayed between the contractor and the agency that you refer to, I would have to refer you to that agency for the information on that question. In terms of the seriousness of the allegation that has been made, I refer you back to the previous answers that I have given in that context of having absolutely no tolerance for this behaviour, of allegations of this. Where allegations have been made, where there is evidence of these allegations, we have in both Victoria Police and the Labour Hire Authority agencies with which we have strengthened their powers to deal with this unacceptable behaviour. Strong action has been and is being taken, with 88 criminal charges being laid, with the cancellation of 151 licences and the blocking of a further 48.

Now, you mentioned before the legislative action that our government has taken. You opposed some of that legislative action that we took to strengthen the Labour Hire Authority.

**John PESUTTO:** No. Premier, I will move on. There is a whole other debate around that, and I won't argue about that.

*Members interjecting.*

**The CHAIR:** Excuse me, Deputy Chair. Let me make this very clear, because this is your first budget estimates. Let me make this clear: you get to ask the questions. Just because you do not like the answer that the Premier has given you does not mean she has not answered the question.

**John PESUTTO:** It had nothing to do with the question asked.

**Jade BENHAM:** On a point of order, Chair, what happens in the chamber, whether the opposition opposed those changes, does not relate to this budget.

*Members interjecting.*

**The CHAIR:** Excuse me, I am going to rule on the point of order. There is no point of order. The Premier was being entirely relevant. The Premier is to finish her answer to your question, whether you like the answer or not.

**Jacinta ALLAN:** Well, not only clearly does Mr Pesutto not like the answer, he does not like being reminded of the work that we have done that has, in part, been opposed by him and his colleagues. But maybe you can go to your next question.

**John PESUTTO:** Premier, we have opposed different things. Your government has opposed a royal commission into corruption on big projects.

**Jacinta ALLAN:** Do you want me to answer that question?

**John PESUTTO:** It is not a question; it is a response.

*Members interjecting.*

**John PESUTTO:** Premier, Labor's social procurement and women in construction policy created this opportunity for Women in Construction and Rock Solid Civil. It was entirely foreseeable, and yet this crooked firm was still on the books for North East Link two years after you were supposed to have cleaned up the sector. Your government's building equality policy requires contractors to meet women's participation targets and implement gender equality action plans. What due diligence was done to ensure those women were not being supplied through firms linked to family violence offenders, bikies or organised crime?

**Jacinta ALLAN:** Well, again I refer you back to the strengthened powers that we have given to the Labour Hire Authority. This behaviour is unacceptable. Having more women involved in the industry was and remains an important policy priority, and those women – and indeed all workers on every worksite – deserve safe and secure workplaces, which is why, in having zero tolerance for this behaviour, we have taken a range of strong actions, and that action is working. The culture is changing. It is changing because there are licences that are being cancelled, there are charges that are being laid, there are whistleblowers that have pathways that are protected. There is a requirement on the construction companies who engage with these subcontractors through their contracting arrangements to provide information of allegations, and so the culture is changing.

I also make this point: this is why it is fundamentally important to me not only that we have taken this action but we continue to do so and that where there are allegations that are being made, like those today, they are immediately referred, because we have investigative bodies with the powers to take the action necessary, as demonstrated by what they have done to date. Workers deserve safe and secure worksites.

**John PESUTTO:** I understand that, Premier –

**Jacinta ALLAN:** Workers also deserve strong, secure representation from those who represent them.

**John PESUTTO:** Okay, Premier. I have limited time, so –

**Jacinta ALLAN:** That is fundamentally important, particularly in a construction industry –

**John PESUTTO:** Okay, Premier. Look, I need to continue asking questions here.

**Jacinta ALLAN:** which is one of the more unsafe workplaces – there are safety challenges on all those worksites.

**John PESUTTO:** Fair enough, Premier. Can you understand why Victorians would be listening to you right now and saying, 'Okay, Premier, if all of what you say is right – if your Wilson review and the changes you brought through Parliament were all, as you say they were, effective to clean up a rotten sector – why do we have this controversy today, which demonstrates without a shadow of a doubt that your measures have comprehensively failed?'

**Jacinta ALLAN:** I will answer that in two parts. The first is repeating that these allegations are appalling. They are disgraceful, and they are already being investigated by the Labour Hire Authority that we have given the strength and power to.

**John PESUTTO:** Obviously not well enough.

**Jacinta ALLAN:** No, I disagree with that. They are already being investigated by the Labour Hire Authority, and if there are any further allegations or evidence, they should be put to Victoria Police as well, because I take these allegations incredibly seriously. It goes back to that point I was making before, and you were not as interested in the bit about protecting workers as I had hoped you would be. Protecting workers and supporting them to have safe and secure worksites is of fundamental importance, particularly in a sector like the construction sector.

**John PESUTTO:** Premier, did anyone in your government check Mr Ellery's and Mr Carter's criminal record by simply googling or searching court records?

**Jacinta ALLAN:** Well, again, I would have to refer you to the relevant independent agency –

**John PESUTTO:** Have you not asked?

**Jacinta ALLAN:** who is responsible for these matters.

**John PESUTTO:** Premier, how much money has gone to Women in Construction?

**Jacinta ALLAN:** I would have to take that on notice.

**John PESUTTO:** You will provide that on notice to the committee. Thank you very much.

**Jacinta ALLAN:** I want to be clear: if there is further information to provide, we will provide it.

**John PESUTTO:** And are you willing, as Premier, on behalf of Victorians to recover any moneys paid to that firm that should not have been paid?

**Jacinta ALLAN:** Well, again, that would be dependent on the first query, and I would have to take advice on that matter, because again, what that question goes to is allegations of illegal and criminal behaviour, and that is something that should be referred to Victoria Police, who have the investigative tools and powers that they need, and they are laying charges. They have laid 88 charges already through the work that they have been undertaking, so if there is further evidence to be made that should be immediately made to Victoria Police.

**John PESUTTO:** So why has so much gone undetected?

**Jacinta ALLAN:** Again, that claim is incorrect, and it is incorrect, as evidenced –

**John PESUTTO:** Well, we have got an example in today's media.

**Jacinta ALLAN:** It is incorrect, as evidenced by the fact that the Labour Hire Authority has cancelled 151 licences and blocked a further 48. It is incorrect, and I think it does a disservice to the incredibly important work that Victoria Police are doing, where they have laid 88 criminal charges. This is evidence, if you like, that where there is evidence that is provided, we have the investigative agencies with the powers to take strong action. That action is working. It is making a difference. There are further reports and claims that have been made that will also be investigated by those investigative agencies. They are doing the work in a very different environment today, where there are also protections for whistleblowers to be able to make claims. There is a requirement for construction companies.

The other point too, and this is an important outcome of the independent review by Greg Wilson, is that there is now an alliance that has been established with Victoria Police, the federal police and the Labour Hire Authority – and WorkSafe, I believe, is involved, as is the Fair Work Commission. These are all agencies that have a role and responsibility in the oversight of the construction industry –

**John PESUTTO:** Thanks, Premier. Just in the interests of time, I have only got less than 2 minutes. Can I –

**Jacinta ALLAN:** and that engagement through that alliance is incredibly important information sharing, because your point about culture is right. It needs to be changed. It must be changed, and there is a responsibility on all of those organisations to take action.

**John PESUTTO:** Yes. Okay. Premier, can you guarantee that the Labour Hire Authority will not give licences to family violence perpetrators?

**Jacinta ALLAN:** I would remind you that the Labour Hire Authority is an independent agency. That allegation is concerning, and it needs to be put to the Labour Hire Authority.

**John PESUTTO:** But you are the head of government. You run a government. Can't you guarantee that it is the policy of your government that the Labour Hire Authority will not give licences to family violence perpetrators?

**Jacinta ALLAN:** That is a different question that you have asked. There are now strengthened requirements around the Labour Hire Authority to give a fit and proper person test, which they need to apply through the labour hire licensing processes.

**John PESUTTO:** Thank you. Okay. Premier, can I finally ask you: according to Geoffrey Watson SC, as quoted in today's media:

Premier Allan's likely response to this latest scandal will be to refer it to the police, which is akin to perpetuating a cover-up given police can do nothing. A powerful agency or commission of inquiry with coercive powers is needed to expose the human and financial cost of this rot ...

Do you accept any of that?

**Jacinta ALLAN:** Unlike Mr Watson, I have absolute confidence in Victoria Police to investigate allegations of criminal behaviour on worksites, and I actually answered that question in my previous answer. I have confidence in Victoria Police. Mr Watson can explain why he does not.

**John PESUTTO:** If Victoria Police are to do all that you say they will, in an industry that is rife with corruption, have you properly resourced Victoria Police? Have you budgeted for this?

**Jacinta ALLAN:** We have the largest police force in the nation.

*Members interjecting.*

**The CHAIR:** Excuse me, members, we are going to go to Ms Kathage.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Thank you, Chair. I would like to take us back to the budget and specifically budget paper 3, page 13, and –

*Members interjecting.*

**The CHAIR:** Excuse me, Deputy Chair. Excuse me, Mr Galea.

**Jacinta ALLAN:** I am assuming Hansard has that reflection from Mr Pesutto.

**The CHAIR:** Excuse me. Let me reiterate this. Apologies, Ms Kathage. I will again reiterate this to you, Deputy Chair: what you say here in this place is broadcast live, and captions are provided for those watching online. I will again remind members: anything you do say, including what you say quietly, will be picked up in the captions. So I would urge you to calm down. Ms Kathage.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Thank you so much. Coming back to the budget, and specifically budget paper 3, page 13, which has information about the affordable school uniforms, school breakfast clubs, Get Active Kids and Glasses for Kids – and I think the Get Active Kids is already up to 250,000 vouchers, and that is \$200 each. Especially when you have got a couple of kids, it adds up very quickly with the sports vouchers, so that one is really great. These different elements of the budget, how are they making sure that kids are not missing out or that a family's financial circumstances do not determine how things end up for them?

**Jacinta ALLAN:** This is a really important point and really goes to the values that sit in our government and making sure that no matter what your family background is or your economic circumstances, kids do not miss out on a great education starting the school day with a full tummy, which is why school breakfast programs are so important. Having a school uniform and being able to participate in school and all the other things that go around life as a young person in schools is really important to me and our government. That is why this budget builds on that incredible work that goes on in schools. You and I have talked about this a lot through what we see through our kids and our own schools, whether it is in our communities or where we send our kids to school, where we see the difference that the education opportunity makes and then making sure that where a young person might have some trouble seeing the board, the free Glasses for Kids program gives them the opportunity to be able to have the glasses and to get the treatment that is needed. That is why we have got the expansion of the Glasses for Kids program in this year's budget.

I think I touched on the school uniform program policy change before, but if I can touch on that again, I think this has been what might seem a simple policy change but is a really important one, because just changing the school policy so that kids do not need a logo on their shorts or their pants or their socks, so you can have non-branded school items, again, is giving families the opportunity to have a more affordable choice. I know in my household the non-logoed item is more sought after now than the logoed item from last year, so it is already making a difference in schools as well.

I also touched on the school breakfast club program, and I am sure all of us have seen those programs operate in our schools. We have expanded that across all of our schools. We have now seen more than 65 million

school breakfasts being delivered through this program. That is a huge number, and again it means that kids are going to go into the classroom with food in their tummy. The way it is being delivered means that there is no difference between different kids wanting to have that opportunity to have breakfast.

I want to come back to the Get Active Kids vouchers, but before I do, I just wanted to also mention the Camps, Sports and Excursions Fund. Again this is for that premise that you referenced: making sure no-one misses out. Those school camps and excursions are where some of those lifetime memories are made about your time at school. I was talking to someone the other day who is a similar age to me, and we were having a bit of a reminisce about going to see Phar Lap in the old museum when it used to be at the top of Russell Street, not the new museum.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Not the races, surely.

**Jacinta ALLAN:** I did not see Phar Lap race – steady, steady. But again, it is those memories that are made and friendships as well. The \$400 for every child in eligible families is, again, a great way that we can give kids the chance to participate in all those other activities at school. The Get Active Kids vouchers is such a great program because it is about supporting families with costs of uniforms and equipment and registration and memberships. It is also a mechanism that helps those sporting clubs as well. It helps them get their membership and participation as well. All of this is about saving families just a little bit more money. As I said before, it is money that maybe is not necessarily being saved; it is going straight into the rising grocery bill or the rising mortgage repayment as a result of the recent interest rate rise.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Free kinder is another one of those interesting policies where it is a cost-of-living support for families, but it has also got that element of encouraging participation in education. Are you able to speak to what elements that free kinder is supporting for families?

**Jacinta ALLAN:** Yeah. Free kinder, again, is great. It means that we have really high kinder participation rates across the state. It is for three-year-old kinder and four-year-old kinder. There is so much evidence and research around the difference an early childhood education makes to lifelong learning and therefore lifelong economic participation and economic outcomes. Alongside the work of free kinder, this budget also has more funding for kinders on school sites – which is great, avoiding the dreaded double drop-off – and grants for expanded kinders. There are five Early Learning Victoria centres. We have got already got 18 of those that have opened up. And then there are the Building Blocks grants. I know the minister particularly enjoys talking about the Building Blocks grants because they do help support the established kinder settings right across the state.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Fantastic. Some people are doing it really tough, though, Premier, and food relief becomes necessary. In this budget we can see on page 37 of BP3 just over \$11 million in food relief for continuing funding for community food security programs and support for Foodbank Victoria for fresh produce, including into regional partner areas. With more Victorians relying on Foodbank – and we are all hearing that in our electorates – how is this budget making sure that no Victorian can go hungry?

**Jacinta ALLAN:** This is really important. The budget does provide an \$11 million food relief package. This includes the \$2.7 million that we committed as an immediate food relief package. We made this commitment at the start of April, and it was in the context of having had that war in Iran that had gone on for, I think at that stage, four or five weeks. It was clearly not ending any time soon, and it clearly has not ended any time soon. We were already then hearing from food relief organisations, whether it was SecondBite food share or Foodbank, that they were seeing more demand. So we wanted to provide an immediate injection of funding and support, because not only was the price of food going up for our food relief agencies, there was also additional pressure that was being put on volunteers, because volunteers were seeing their cost of fuel going up, and they were finding it hard to get in and do their volunteer work. The food relief agencies were also having extra costs, not just because of the cost of food going up, but the vehicles they use were mostly diesel fuel vehicles. The cost of diesel had gone up higher than the price of fuel itself. So these were real pressures that were being experienced.

While we provided that immediate support to our food agencies, there is also some additional funding for neighbourhood houses, and I want to acknowledge the role of neighbourhood houses in our food relief network. I was with the member for Ashwood last Friday at the Ashwood neighbourhood house, and we were talking to

the team there. They do a lunch every Tuesday, and they are now having 60 meals just in a smallish neighbourhood house. They are doing 60 meals on a Tuesday, and that number has grown from about 40 a year ago. These are examples where these pressures are real. These pressures that are caused by circumstances a long way from Victoria are reverberating through families and households here in Victoria, and when presented with the pressures that have been put on families, we have chosen to support them now, whether it is through the other cost-of-living measures I mentioned earlier or indeed with food relief. It is about understanding that there is a role for government to play, and we will support families at this time.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** I was really excited to see additional financial counselling in the Mitchell shire and other council areas across Victoria in the budget. How are these different elements working together to support families that are doing it tough?

**Jacinta ALLAN:** The financial counselling services often do partner and run with different neighbourhood houses and the food relief agencies as well. There is huge benefit from investing in financial counselling and the really practical support it provides to families, and so we have provided support in this budget. But also, for another initiative, we are investing \$2.3 million over two years to expand Bring Your Bills day. I would encourage all members of the committee, if there is an opportunity, to go and see one of the Bring Your Bills days in action. They are an incredibly powerful way at a grassroots community level to make a real difference with families who are doing it tough. Mr Tak is nodding. I think you have seen them through the South East Community Links network. What they do: literally, as the name suggests, families, people are encouraged to grab their bills, and in a room they have all the different utilities, government agencies who are literally there to help. Their job is to provide assistance in how to maybe change the plan and maybe help with some repayments. It is a hugely powerful way to make a real difference. Again, what I love about it is that it is done at a really grassroots level, at a really local level, which is why we are expanding the reach of South East Community Links. It was estimated at a recent Bring Your Bills event in Hampton Park that \$3.5 million in debt and savings was supported in just one day – that is just one day – for that community. Again, when you can provide people with access to the information, with someone who can give that assistance and guidance to step through processes that they might need a helping hand with, you can really make a difference in people's lives.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** It is quite a substantial suite of cost-of-living supports in all different parts of people's lives. This morning the Treasurer took us through the strength of the economy and how it is sort of 15 times larger than pre-pandemic levels, and we have got an operating surplus this year. On one hand we have got an operating surplus; on the other we have got substantial cost-of-living relief. How has the government's responsible financial management allowed us to deliver help to Victorian families right now?

**Jacinta ALLAN:** This goes to how we set about approaching this budget, and we set about the task of wanting to make sure that we were delivering against that fiscal strategy and why we are reducing debt as a share of the economy, and we will continue to deliver that responsible fiscal strategy but also doing so at the same time as growing the economy. As a result of the decisions we took through the budget, we have a surplus this year; I mentioned earlier a surplus this year and average surpluses of \$1.7 billion a year over the forward estimates period. We are doing all of this whilst at the same time continuing to invest in the services that people rely on – in the schools, in the hospitals and in more police – and also too understanding that when times are tough there is a choice that governments make: you can either help or not. We have chosen to help, given those pressures are real. The consequences of not helping are real too. The consequences of not providing that help can mean that people might miss a mortgage repayment or they go without a meal. These are real choices that people are making and that we are wanting to support to ease those pressures.

I do acknowledge that there is a different way of making decisions about how you go about setting a budget and the choices that you make. There are alternative ways to cut into the public service, to cut into one in seven public sector jobs that would risk cutting into your child protection workers, your disability workers and your allied health workers. I accept there is a different way of approaching your budget settings and having an approach that would rip \$40 billion out of the budget, which basically means not only are those frontline services getting cut, it also means nothing is getting built as well. So it costs jobs, it risks shrinking the economy, and I know that is the approach that some in this room want to take.

We will not be taking that approach, because we can see through the budget that we have in place that by being able to follow the fiscal strategy, drive down net debt as a share of the economy and deliver a surplus, we

continue to grow the economy. This is a really important point: deep, hard, fast cuts like those that are being proposed that they want to do – that the Liberal Party, the National Party and probably One Nation want to bring to this state – not only risk hurting families and cutting jobs, they also risk shrinking the economy. We have got an economy that is growing. We have got an economy that is creating jobs. We have got businesses that are investing here because they know they have got access to a skilled workforce and also their families, particularly if they are families that are choosing to live here from around the world, can rely on good public health care, our free public hospital system and great government schools. They are the foundations of a strong civil society, where you have the services that families need, an economy that is growing, an environment that is creating and supporting jobs and a government that reaches out and provides help when it is needed. That is the sort of budget that we have delivered. That is how we have approached this, recognising that that is the role for government. Again, I appreciate people in this room want to take a different approach. Hard and fast cuts, hurting people, cutting public services and slashing jobs – that is not our approach, and we have demonstrated that you can deliver a responsible budget, deliver that fiscal strategy and deliver a surplus. We are the only government on the eastern seaboard, federal or state, to deliver a surplus and continue to invest in the services people rely on.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** And that investment in frontline services –

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Ms Kathage. The committee –

**Michael GALEA:** Can I just clarify that it is now the view of the Liberal Party that the police should be acting on the whim of the government of the day, because that is an outrageous statement.

**Richard RIORDAN:** No, we are just saying that if the government of the day gets the information, it should do something about it.

**Michael GALEA:** That is an outrageous thing to be saying.

**Richard RIORDAN:** If you knew there was an invasion –

**Michael GALEA:** If that is how you think government should operate, that is an extraordinary thing, that any government in this country should be directing the police on their own whims –

**The CHAIR:** Mr Galea. Mr Riordan.

**Richard RIORDAN:** If you are proud of the *Age* today, well –

**The CHAIR:** Mr Riordan, you are not in the schoolyard. What I will say to everyone here is I do not uphold the point of order. A transcript will be provided. A draft transcript will be provided to members. The transcript can be checked. I will again remind members the constant interjections are done at your own risk, your own peril. What you say is often picked up by Hansard accidentally, and it is up to you whether it is live captioned.

The committee is going to take a short break before resuming this hearing at 3:30 pm. I declare this hearing adjourned.

The committee will now resume its consideration of the portfolio of the Premier. I am going to go to Ms Benham.

**Jade BENHAM:** Thank you, Chair. Premier, taxpayer money from your Big Build has flowed to Women in Construction, a company owned by a convicted family violence offender and linked to drug traffickers, bikies and organised crime figures. Surely this makes you very, very uncomfortable. How on earth do you sleep at night?

*Members interjecting.*

**The CHAIR:** Excuse me, members. Ms Benham, that is not a question. I refer you back to the budget to ask a question, please.

*Members interjecting.*

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Ms Kathage, Mr Galea. Please afford the Premier the respect that she deserves.

**Jade BENHAM:** Premier, with respect, as you said earlier, you, me, we each have daughters, teenage daughters. Surely this does not sit well with you. Can you guarantee Victorian parents and women that no woman on a Big Build site will be exploited into the future?

**Jacinta ALLAN:** As I said earlier, Chair, I am disgusted and appalled by these allegations. And I am disgusted and appalled by these allegations because I think women deserve to have an opportunity to succeed in industries like the construction industry, which is why I was committed to increasing the number of women in the construction industry. And I am just appalled at the way the allegations that have come about as a result of allegations of criminal behaviour. I can already give a commitment, through the actions we have already taken, that we are doing everything we can to protect women, to protect girls, to protect all workers on construction sites because I have zero tolerance for this behaviour. It is disgraceful, it is disgusting, there is no place for it, and I will continue to take whatever action that is necessary. It is why we have strengthened the powers of Victoria Police, it is why we have strengthened the powers of the Labour Hire Authority; actions that are working, culture that is changing, charges that are being laid, licences that are being cancelled. And we will continue this work for women and girls, who deserve safety and respect on work sites, and indeed all workers in the construction industry, who deserve a safe and secure workplace.

**Jade BENHAM:** I could not agree with you more. When was the first time you were made aware of the allegations canvassed today?

**Jacinta ALLAN:** I have addressed that question earlier today.

**Jade BENHAM:** Of the 88 charges you have also spoken about today, how many individuals have been charged?

**Jacinta ALLAN:** I would have to refer you to Victoria Police. They are charges that have been laid by Victoria Police as the independent investigative agency.

**Jade BENHAM:** Thank you. Mr Riordan.

**Richard RIORDAN:** Thanks, Ms Benham. Secretary Moule, you have been in the job for five years and eight months. Have you ever received any allegations of corruption or crime on the Big Build sites?

**Jeremi MOULE:** No, I have not.

**Richard RIORDAN:** None at all?

**Jeremi MOULE:** No.

**Richard RIORDAN:** So the people in the community only contact the media?

**Jeremi MOULE:** DPC is not a complaints-receiving, handling or investigative body, Mr Riordan. No allegations have come to me.

**Richard RIORDAN:** Okay. Premier, you have said countless times today that VicPol must investigate. You have made it clear that you are refusing to have an inquiry into allegations.

**Jacinta ALLAN:** That is not correct.

**The CHAIR:** Excuse me, Premier. Mr Riordan, as I have said earlier today, please do not put words into the mouths of witnesses in the preface to a question. You may ask the question.

**Richard RIORDAN:** So the Premier is happy to have an inquiry into the Big Build.

**Jacinta ALLAN:** We had one. It was the Wilson review. There were recommendations that we have now accepted and are implementing, and as a result of those recommendations we have strengthened the powers of the Labour Hire Authority. I remind you that you did not support the strengthening of those powers.

**Richard RIORDAN:** Okay. Back to the point, though, Premier, you have said that it is up to the police to investigate allegations. Yes?

**Jacinta ALLAN:** As the independent investigative agencies, with all the tools and the powers to investigate criminal and corrupt behaviour, yes, because I have confidence in Victoria Police.

**Richard RIORDAN:** So when you hear these allegations and see these allegations printed in our major newspapers, you do not think it is your responsibility. Do you think it is the responsibility of an 18-year-old apprentice, male or female, or a small business contractor to take it up with the police when they see corruption?

**Jacinta ALLAN:** Victoria Police are the independent investigative –

**Richard RIORDAN:** No, no, that is not the question. The question is simple: who are you suggesting make the allegations to the police? If it is not yours and it is not your government's and it is not your ministers' responsibility to raise these issues with the police, who are you expecting to raise these issues?

**The CHAIR:** Excuse me, Mr Riordan. That is not what the Premier said. The Premier is attempting to answer your question –

**Richard RIORDAN:** No, the Premier is telling me again about the independence of the police.

**The CHAIR:** Excuse me, Mr Riordan, it is not an invitation for you to start discussing it with me. The Premier is attempting to answer your question. How you use your time is up to you, but you have asked the Premier a question, and you will afford her the opportunity –

**Richard RIORDAN:** And I expect an answer as to who she thinks is responsible.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Riordan, the Premier is attempting to answer your question, but you continue to talk over the top of her because you do not like the way in which she is responding.

**Richard RIORDAN:** Because she is not answering.

**The CHAIR:** Excuse me. The Premier is responding to your question.

**Richard RIORDAN:** Responding, not answering.

**Jacinta ALLAN:** Mr Riordan, I take my responsibilities very seriously to ensure that the architecture is in place to ensure that any allegation of criminal behaviour in workplaces is referred, whether it is to Victoria Police – who you cannot dismiss as easily as you are attempting to today – as the independent investigative body to investigate criminal and corrupt behaviour. And what we have done in the last couple of years is put in place a framework that has absolutely zero tolerance for this behaviour, and it goes directly to the example you gave. If a young person on a construction worksite either sees or is experiencing alleged criminal, intimidatory, illegal behaviour, we have now got a protected whistleblower pathway for those complaints to be made. We now have a requirement –

**Richard RIORDAN:** So the integrity of the Big Build project is going to be up to an 18-year-old to take the initiative, with all the fear and scare that is associated with that, and yet the Premier, who has it dished up for her on a plate on the front page of the major paper of the state, is not prepared to take that forward?

**Jacinta ALLAN:** Mr Riordan, your actions are undermining the seriousness of this matter. I was demonstrating to you that we have taken strong action by putting in place –

**Richard RIORDAN:** What action are you doing after today?

**Jacinta ALLAN:** the framework that demonstrates that there is not only no tolerance for this behaviour but there are the arrangements in place. As I said, should any worker experience behaviour of the nature which you describe, there are now strengthened mechanisms and oversights –

**Richard RIORDAN:** But you are wanting the workers to do it.

**The CHAIR:** Excuse me, Mr Riordan.

**Jacinta ALLAN:** for people to be protected should they have a complaint to be made.

**Richard RIORDAN:** You are talking about the most violent, corrupt bikies and groups in the state, and you want an 18-year-old to front up to that, but when you get the information you will not do anything with it.

*Members interjecting.*

**The CHAIR:** Excuse me, Mr Galea. Mr Riordan, this is not the committee to grandstand in. I will tell you that once.

**Richard RIORDAN:** This is the committee to find out for the people of Victoria how we are dealing with \$15 billion worth of corruption.

**The CHAIR:** This is not the committee. You have asked the question, and the Premier is attempting to answer your question. You just will not listen to the Premier's answer. The Premier can continue with her response.

**Richard RIORDAN:** The Premier is wanting an 18-year-old to stand up to CFMEU thugs and bikies.

**Michael GALEA:** That is not what she is saying, and you know it.

**Richard RIORDAN:** It is what I heard, what the people of Victoria heard.

*Members interjecting.*

**The CHAIR:** Excuse me, Mr Galea. The Premier is responding to your question, which I might add was borderline hypothetical with a number of circumstances.

**Richard RIORDAN:** There is nothing hypothetical about what was in the *Age* today. It is fact.

**The CHAIR:** The Premier can continue with her response.

**Jacinta ALLAN:** Thank you, Chair. I repeat: there is no tolerance, and not only is there no tolerance, I have taken and my government has taken immediate and strong action. There are responsibilities here for me. There is a responsibility on the construction companies who are responsible for managing these worksites, who engage these subcontractors. They are now required as part of their contractual arrangements to report any allegations.

**Richard RIORDAN:** What are you required to do?

**Jacinta ALLAN:** I mentioned earlier the alliance that has now been established, because there are a number of federal and state agencies who share responsibility for the oversight of a safe workplace. There is now responsibility –

**Richard RIORDAN:** Premier, if I am a betting man –

**Jacinta ALLAN:** No, Mr Riordan, I would appreciate –

**Richard RIORDAN:** Nick McKenzie has one staff person helping him and he can come up with a problem of which you continue to refuse to tell this committee how you plan to safeguard workers in Victoria and the Victorian budget.

**The CHAIR:** Excuse me, Mr Riordan, that is an absolute misrepresentation of what the Premier has responded to.

**Richard RIORDAN:** In your opinion.

**The CHAIR:** Excuse me, Mr Riordan, you will afford me the respect on this committee as Chair. This is your first time with me as Chair, but you will respect me, and you will afford the Premier and other witnesses

sitting here the respect that they deserve. This is just the beginning of this budget estimates. We have another six days to go.

**Richard RIORDAN:** It would be nice to get some facts.

**The CHAIR:** You are getting answers, Mr Riordan, and I would advise you to turn on your ears. Now, the Premier can continue with her response.

**Jacinta ALLAN:** Now, Mr Riordan, it is important that you take some time to understand the framework that has been put in place. My role as Premier, in partnership with the ministers who are responsible for these agencies, is to set the regulatory framework, to bring the legislation to the Parliament to strengthen the powers of independent investigative agencies to then go and do the work which they are doing. They are doing the work, and your observations today are undermining and are not recognising the enormous work that is being undertaken by Victoria Police, who have laid 88 charges. The Labour Hire –

**Richard RIORDAN:** Premier, of those –

**Jacinta ALLAN:** Mr Riordan, I would appreciate –

**Richard RIORDAN:** No, you have had long enough to answer the question. You will not tell me what you are doing today.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Riordan, you have asked the question and a series of questions. The Premier is attempting to answer them.

**Richard RIORDAN:** I have asked the Premier what actions she will take from the allegations today, and she will not tell us.

**The CHAIR:** You just will not allow her the opportunity. The Premier is responding to you, Mr Riordan.

**Richard RIORDAN:** Well, it does not take that long to answer what she is going to do.

**The CHAIR:** Well, Mr Riordan, whether you are listening or not is up to you.

**Richard RIORDAN:** It is not question time.

**The CHAIR:** The Premier is responding. Premier.

**Jacinta ALLAN:** I was also going to refer you to the implementation, because you referenced this earlier. There has been an inquiry, an independent inquiry, by Mr Greg Wilson, and all of those recommendations have been acted upon. We now have, as one of those recommendations, an alliance. I appreciate the opportunity to have you understand this answer. There is now an alliance in place between federal and state agencies who have responsibility across the worksites. Further to that, we are seeing the culture changing. It is unacceptable, as I have said on a number of occasions today, the behaviour that has been reported. We have also strengthened the powers of Victoria Police to deal with organised crime, and we will continue to take further action, but we will continue to take –

**Richard RIORDAN:** But what are you doing with specific allegations? We have got a department head who claims in five years and eight months he has not had one thing said to him – in five years and eight months. There is barely a person who drives a ute in Victoria that cannot give you an example of crime and corruption on the worksites of Victoria at the moment. And you have got you who has heard nothing, you have got a department secretary who has heard nothing. It is like you are not listening.

**The CHAIR:** Excuse me, Mr Riordan. I have been chairing this committee for almost four years. Your behaviour is the most childish that I have seen. I suggest you sit back and think about your behaviour now.

**Richard RIORDAN:** I just want the Premier to answer the most serious allegations that have been dished up in your time –

**The CHAIR:** Mr Riordan, you can choose to use up your time the way in which you think. This committee would actually like to extract the evidence from the Premier. She is answering your question. Just because you do not like the answer she is giving does not mean she is not answering it.

**Richard RIORDAN:** I do not like the answer because it is a filibuster.

**The CHAIR:** Did you have another question?

**Jade BENHAM:** Chair, I have a question.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Ms Benham. Common sense will prevail, surely.

**Jade BENHAM:** Premier, as a female leader and role model, the highest in this state, if you are not going to stick up for young women and girls in this scandal, if you cannot take responsibility for this as a female leader, as a mother, who can they look up to? Who can our girls look up to, Premier?

**Lauren Kathage** interjected.

**The CHAIR:** Excuse me, Ms Kathage.

**Jacinta ALLAN:** I repeat, Ms Benham, what I said to you earlier: I find these allegations disgusting and distasteful, which is why, when previous allegations had been made of illegal and criminal behaviour, I took immediate and strong action –

**Jade BENHAM:** What immediate action has been taken today, Premier?

**Jacinta ALLAN:** and that action is now working. What can happen today is that these allegations that have been made can be referred to Victoria Police, who have stronger powers today to investigate this behaviour. It is my expectation that if anyone is holding further information or evidence, it must be referred. Your question about leadership goes to this point. I take these responsibilities deeply seriously. I care, and those of us in the labour movement are grounded in the values of giving workers safe and secure workplaces.

**Jade BENHAM:** Will you refer these allegations then? Will you help and refer these allegations –

**Richard Riordan** interjected.

**The CHAIR:** Excuse me. What I will say, Mr Riordan, is your disrespect – we have still got about 5 hours to go – cannot go much further. The Premier to continue.

**Jacinta ALLAN:** And so these allegations – because I want to be clear, the allegations that have been made have not been made to me directly. However, I will take the advice from the Secretary about the ability to refer this to Victoria Police. But as I demonstrated earlier, allegations involving this company are already under investigation by the Labour Hire Authority, and you cannot easily dismiss that as you are today. These are already –

**Jade BENHAM:** No-one is dismissing the Labour Hire Authority. I am asking you: if these young women cannot rely on the highest leadership role for a woman in this state to help in their biggest time of need, who can they rely on? Will you refer these allegations to Victoria Police?

**Jacinta ALLAN:** I have just answered that part of your question. And further to that, the Labour Hire Authority have already indicated publicly that they do not intend to renew this company's licence. Your question about supporting young women and girls – let us not go down that path of weaponising young women and girls and their future. Our commitment is to support women and girls to have safe and secure workplaces, to ensure that they have the best of workplace representation and the strongest investigative agencies to support them should there be allegations or evidence of illegal behaviour. We have strengthened those investigative agencies.

And furthermore, to your question about what action I have taken to protect women and girls, we set up a whistleblower protection pathway. We have required their bosses to report this behaviour. We have required their companies to engage with the alliance of federal and state and policing agencies, and we will continue to

take strong action because we will back workers – women, girls, men and boys – to have safe, secure workplaces.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Premier. We are going to go to Mr Tak.

**Meng Heang TAK:** Thank you, Chair, Premier and officials.

*Members interjecting.*

**The CHAIR:** Excuse me. Mr Tak has a question.

**Meng Heang TAK:** Thank you, Premier. I turn to budget paper 3. Page 13 details an investment of more than \$5.5 billion in education. I also note recent reporting about enterprise bargaining with our hardworking public school teachers. Premier, are you able to provide the committee with an update?

**Jacinta ALLAN:** Thank you, Mr Tak, and thank you for your shared interest in and commitment to public education and also for our incredible hardworking teachers and staff to be supported every day, and particularly now into the future. I am really pleased to advise the committee that we will be supporting and making our hardworking teachers and school leaders and education staff the best paid in the country, and we entered the recent enterprise bargaining negotiations with that approach. We have always said that teachers deserve a pay rise, and that is exactly what we are delivering, and we are delivering it to the levels of our teachers being the best paid in the country.

I must say, as someone who sends my own kids to our local government schools, they have earned it. They work hard, and I see the work that teachers and staff do every single day. I see the difference it makes in not just the way my kids are learning and growing and thinking critically about the world but also how they are developing as young people. That is why teachers are so important both to the education of kids today but also to the sort of society we are in the future as they support young people to be the very best that they possibly can be. I am pleased to advise the committee that we have reached a 28.3 per cent agreement over the next four years with teachers and staff, and this goes to that principle of recognising the work they do, valuing the work they do. And this is entirely consistent too with our approach to public education, whether it is through the agreement that has been reached today, the significant programs that we deliver through our schools that go in and around the classrooms, the additional \$2.2 billion that is in this year's budget for the disability inclusion program, because that is a really fundamentally important part of our government system – making sure kids of all abilities can participate, can grow and learn. I have visited so many of our special development schools, seeing kids be supported in classrooms by the teachers and staff, and they do such important work.

This is also an agreement that recognises the significant value and expertise of the education support staff, and I want to give this group of staff in our government school system a big recognition, because the role that they play in supporting teachers and students in the classroom is also so incredibly important. We have talked a lot about cost-of-living pressures, so this is a significant wage outcome for teachers and education staff. It is also going to continue to strengthen and support our great government school system that we have here in Victoria. It also comes at a time when we have seen – I am sure you have seen concerns in your own community – our Liberal–National opponents, Mr Tak, want to cut into these schools, cut into these frontline services, cut into our education system through a program of \$40 billion in cuts. You cannot take that amount of money out of the budget, as leading economists like David Haywood have said, without making deep, deep cuts. And education is one of those areas we know that the Liberal–National parties would cut into because we have seen it before. We have seen it before with significant cuts in the past. Those of us from country Victoria remember the schools that were closed. The agreement that has been reached is another demonstration of our Labor government's commitment to public education. As I said, I see the difference it makes every day. I am proud to be a Premier who sends her kids to a government school in our local community. I am proud of the work that – sorry?

*Members interjecting.*

**The CHAIR:** As I have said before, Mr Pesutto, you can be picked up on the live captioning. I would warn you again that that can be another issue that can embarrass members.

**A member** interjected.

**The CHAIR:** Excuse me. Premier.

**Jacinta ALLAN:** We will continue to support our education system, and we will do so again with some of the initiatives in this year's budget. I just repeat: you do not get these sorts of outcomes if you are ripping \$40 billion out of your budget – \$40 billion that cuts into teachers and nurses and police, \$40 billion that means new schools do not get built. We have opened 121 new schools, quite a few of them in the members for Point Cook and Yan Yean's communities. These are the sorts of outcomes you get when you invest. These are the sorts of outcomes too you can achieve. I remind the committee that this agreement is struck with a budget that delivers a surplus, that is driving debt down as a percentage of the economy, and that means you can continue to invest in the services that people rely on. We all know that education, and a government education, is the way that every kid gets the best chance to participate in our community and economy.

**Meng Heang TAK:** Thank you, Premier. It is a great agreement. I refer to the same budget paper 3, page 13, and you just said the government has opened another 121 new schools since 2017, and that is including a record of 19 schools this year. With a \$419.6 million continued pipeline for new schools and the \$104 million to buy land in the growth areas, including Greater Geelong, Wyndham, Hume and Cardinia, Premier, how is this budget ensuring every Victorian child has access to a great public school close to home?

**Jacinta ALLAN:** Thank you for that question. A couple of the initiatives that I have already talked to the committee about today are examples of that. I spoke a lot when I was talking about cost of living about how we have the ability through our schools to deliver really meaningful cost-of-living support with the Glasses for Kids, the school breakfast programs and the Camps, Sports and Excursions Fund. What I would like to spend a moment or two on is the – and you made this reference to the 121 new schools that have opened in recent years, and how this budget builds on that investment that we have made in capital works. I think it takes it to nearly \$20 billion of investment in infrastructure. And I should make this point: that investment sits outside the arrangements we have with the federal government to fund our schools. This is additional funding that sits above and beyond that.

We will continue to invest. We have got a lot of growth; we are a big city and a growing city. We should be proud of the fact that more and more people are choosing us as the place to raise their kids and start their business. People from around the world are choosing us, and that is something we are not only proud of, we support, and we support it through delivering good government school services. There is a number of new school areas that are being supported in Wyndham, in Casey, in Melton – a new campus of South Melbourne Primary School, which is great for that community – and there is also investing in the next range of works through planning and design for early works at a new school in Arden. Why are we talking about a new school at Arden? Because we have opened up that space with the new Metro Tunnel station, and now, as we are planning the future of the space around the station as a community where people live, we are planning for a new school there.

Just a reminder for the committee, the current Leader of the Liberal Party called the Metro Tunnel a waste – called the investment of the Metro Tunnel a waste. I know it is shocking to think that you would describe it in that way. Well, not only have we got a Metro Tunnel and a new station, we are building a new school there as well. We will continue. Also there is funding in the budget to maintain our schools and continue to make these investments in small maintenance works, bigger redevelopment works and in brand new schools to support all of our Victorians across the state to have access to a great education.

**Meng Heang TAK:** Thank you, Premier. I refer to the same budget paper 3, page 13: investing \$23.5 million for best practice teaching and learning, as well as \$69.3 million to support vocational education and \$75.5 million for an in-demand career program in schools. Premier, how is this budget supporting excellence inside our classrooms and providing students with the best opportunity to pursue a career after high school?

**Jacinta ALLAN:** Thank you. That is a really important question about that connection between the more senior levels of schooling and then when students graduate from their schooling years the pathways that they pursue. Your question reminds me that I should have also referenced as part of my previous answers that as a result of the incredible work of our teachers and staff in our government schools and the support that we have given through successive budgets, in Victoria – other members of the committee may not be aware of this – we have the best NAPLAN results in the nation, and the last set of NAPLAN results were actually the strongest for

Victorians. And that is not something that just happens overnight. It takes sustained investment, support for teachers and support for students, and you do not get those sorts of results by cutting into schools. You only go backwards when you make the sorts of cuts that the Liberal and National parties are proposing to bring to our government schooling system. So we need to continue the work, and particularly in that area that you referred to.

A good example of where we have invested and reformed in the senior schooling years is the introduction of the vocational major in senior secondary schooling. That is really making a great difference. My nephew is studying the vocational major right now, and it is a great pathway for students. Our budget continues our investment in vocational learning and skills in schools. There is funding for VET and applied learning in secondary colleges. The Head Start program, which is a great program, we are providing \$46 million in the budget for this program. It is about supporting students in years 10, 11 and 12 to do a student-based apprenticeship or traineeship program, so it is a bit of a bridge between school and the workplace. There is further funding to connect early school leavers with further education training or employment pathways as well.

A smaller allocation but one that I think is important to mention is the vocational taster experience pilot, giving young people a chance to try a few different careers, to have a look and see if there are a few different ones that they might want to pursue. And then for rural and regional students and schools there is some additional funding for transport for VET students to be able to get to their vocational training classes, recognising that there is a little bit more distance for those of us in rural and regional Victoria to travel to the education institution.

**Meng Heang TAK:** Yes. Thank you, Premier. Another major part of the allocation is the \$2.1 billion into students with disability, Premier, for the reform that helps students with disability to get support that they need in government schools. How is this budget ensuring inclusion is genuinely non-negotiable in Victoria's education system for those with disabilities?

**Jacinta ALLAN:** I am really glad we have got the opportunity to go back and talk in a little bit more detail about this \$2 billion of investment for students with a disability. It was actually on budget day itself, the morning of budget day, I had the opportunity to meet with a couple of parents and a disability support mentor to talk about the difference that this program is making by way of making sure kids with a disability have an opportunity to participate to their fullest potential and to their fullest ability and giving them that opportunity in both our schools and also some of those specialist settings as well. We are hearing how it is making a real difference. So that is why this budget provides that significant investment to continue what has been an important reform piece of work that has been done in recent years. You are right to say, 'What does this funding go to?' The funding goes into areas for schools to employ additional staff. Also, some of the funding is to support training for teachers to, in turn, better be able to support students with a disability in their classroom. Then there is also funding for individualised care for those students who have some higher, more complex needs. This is working hard to ensure that every school is an inclusive school for all students, which is a key principle of the program.

Also what is in this program is some funds of \$23 million to continue the free, high-intensity outside-school-hours care at 31 specialist schools. This has been such a transformative program for parents with kids with a disability, to be able to access out-of-hours school care in the same way that other families can for their kids. This is continuing this program, and I have heard from parents directly in my own community how this means that they can go back to work, it means they can do a bit more work, it gives them a bit of respite to be able to do other things, as well as knowing that their kids are getting really great education and are really well cared for. Part of the funding too is for the disabilities transport program, which means we will be looking at providing some additional bus services to meet this growing area of demand.

**Meng Heang TAK:** Thank you, Premier. With the remaining time, I would just like to talk more, if you can, please, about free TAFE. It is very popular in my electorate. Certainly on page 63 it showed the Victorian government invested more than \$414.4 million into this investment. Can you say a little bit more?

**Jacinta ALLAN:** I will be as brief as I can. We have got three new TAFE centres of excellence. I should acknowledge our partner in Canberra, the Albanese Labor government, is partnering with us at a housing construction centre, obviously getting more homes built; home and community care; digital AI technology centre; and a renewable energy centre of excellence. Of course renewable energy is a big and important part of

our state's future, and our Labor government is going to back the training for the future workforce of that industry as well.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much, Mr Tak. Mr Puglielli.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you, Chair. And good afternoon, Premier and officials. Just to start us off, the budget makes numerous references to investment in and attraction of data centres – for example, in the ‘Budget Overview’, page 46. Premier, I understand Victoria currently has somewhere around 40 data centres, and you personally have been very active in advocating for data centres to come and do business here in this state. I would like to understand your aspirations for this sector. How many centres would you hope to have operating in Victoria by the end of the forward estimates?

**Jacinta ALLAN:** Thank you for your question. The support that we have been providing and focused on supporting for the data centre sector comes in recognition that we are well placed here in Melbourne and Victoria in the nation as a leading centre for data centres to establish, because we have land, we have the skilled workforce as well and we have secure energy supply, and it is really seeing it as an opportunity in a growing industry. We can come to some of the challenges that come with this industry, I am sure, but it is recognising that this is an industry that is here to stay globally. Globally companies are looking around the world for places to invest. We are making sure that Melbourne and Victoria is the key destination here in Australia for that investment, because there are tens of billions of dollars of potential investment. If you think about it a bit like the renewable energy industry, the renewable energy industry is not just critical in terms of providing that secure energy supply into the future, which is fundamental to the way our society operates, it is also a huge generator of investments. There are billions and billions of dollars of investments that come, which means that is great for our economic growth, which I have talked a lot about this afternoon. It is also important for jobs as well, which is why, just in passing, I do find it astonishing that people would want to pull the plug on our renewable energy industry, like the Liberal–National–One Nation parties want to do, because it is so central to the security of our economy going forward. It is in that similar vein that data centres are part of an investment opportunity that supports jobs and prosperity here in Victoria. As I said, we are seeing companies from around the world looking at places to invest. In answer to your question about how many, we are continuing to attract as many as we possibly can in a way that they go through our investment pipeline and go through our processes, but we are a destination of choice for so many of these companies. I opened recently CDC in Brooklyn, where they have made billions of dollars of investment in the western suburbs. I have got a couple of colleagues here from the western suburbs who are seeing this. This means good jobs in these local communities that are important for the future.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you. You touched on the jobs element with respect to data centres. I would like to go a bit closer into this issue. Are there any projections available to you that you can share with the committee around how many jobs a data centre will bring to the state aside from its initial construction?

**Jacinta ALLAN:** I am not the minister for economic growth. I might need to ask the minister for economic growth to come to you with that information, because that goes in part to that question around what is in the investment pipeline, because there are job numbers that sit within that investment pipeline. I am not sure when he is appearing before your committee. If there is some further information we can provide before then, we can look to do that.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you. That would be much appreciated. Perhaps the ‘how many jobs’ questions I can refer to that portfolio, but in terms of what types of jobs, once you have constructed the data centre, are there further jobs that are brought online with that centre operating?

**Jacinta ALLAN:** There most certainly are. I have visited a number of them. There are the ongoing staff that are needed to operate and maintain the data centres. But it too goes to Victoria's broader reputation as an innovator of tech. As we have grown in recent years, we are known globally as one of the top three in the world for medtech and biotech. I think that with BioNTech and Moderna at Monash University we are about the only place – and my colleagues might correct me – in the world where you have that end to end: two of those big mRNA medtech companies going from research through to commercialisation here in Melbourne. So that is just one example of how we are a global leader in these sorts of industries. There is the potential for us to continue to be a global leader in this space. Part of it goes to how you attract the investment and the support you give to the infrastructure. Workforce is really important, and this goes to the reference earlier to Mr Tak's

question around the TAFE partnerships. These are great jobs for TAFE-qualified workers – really great jobs for TAFE-qualified workers. And also too, it taps us into that global AI industry where we can learn from this technology. I do understand that there are some questions about what AI means for the future of particular industries and particular workforces, which is why part of the work in our mission statement is to reflect that and to also identify those workforces that might experience a transition because of AI and the role of government there to support those workers.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you. Noting again another reference within the budget papers on this issue, budget paper 2, page 23 highlights this country as a key data centre hub in the Asia-Pacific region, and specifically Melbourne as being in the top 10 markets within that region. But to make a jurisdictional comparison from further afield, the Republic of Ireland has a similar population to our state, but now they accepted investment in data centres to the point where now almost a quarter of their electricity consumption goes solely to data centres. I understand that over the last five years, data centre electricity consumption there has risen from 5 per cent of total metered electricity in 2015 to almost a quarter of total metered electricity today. Now, these energy demands have consequently delayed Ireland's transition to renewable energy and have increased electricity bills to fund the required grid upgrades. Premier, do you foresee potentially Victoria going down that same path?

**Jacinta ALLAN:** Not necessarily, and there are a few reasons why. We are well down the path on our renewable energy program – well down the path – and we will continue down that path. I know we mentioned before the Liberal–National–One Nation partnership does not want to see more renewable energy come into the state. We saw that very clearly last night from the federal Liberal leader making that very clear. I think it is well understood that it is our Labor government who will continue to work hard. We are doing that through bringing back the SEC and the investments that the SEC is making in important renewable energy. That is one of the reasons why we are seeing Victoria as a potential destination. But in terms of that, with any investment, it does not matter whether it is a data centre investment or other industries that draw down on the local utility network, be it water or energy – I just think in my own electorate I have a number of food manufacturing industries, for example. I have some heavy manufacturing industries. I think in the south-east of Melbourne is another example. There is nothing particularly new in companies that come and invest here that you have got to factor in their energy and other utility security. That is why, as part of that whole-of-government work, we have a sustainable data centre action plan that looks at these issues. These are things that we have to work through. They are not necessarily blockers to the opportunity, they are just things that we need to work through as we work through each investment opportunity that comes.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you. Just to make sure that I have understood parts of your answer thoroughly, is it that you are saying that our advancement in renewables in Victoria is what would shield us from those circumstances that they have experienced in Ireland, that energy consumption that they are facing there?

**Jacinta ALLAN:** I am saying that part of securing Victoria's energy future is continuing to bring on more secure renewable energy, regardless of the industries that may be seeking to draw down on that energy.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you. As I believe you would be aware, earlier this week, the Australian Energy Market Operator updated its long-term outlook at a monthly meeting of industry and consumer participants. They reported that data centres would consume one-eighth of current electricity use in a decade nationally. Further to the responses you provided, Premier, what assurances have you received that our state will have enough electricity supply to power this rate of expansion of data centre infrastructure?

**Jacinta ALLAN:** I do feel I have touched on some of that in my earlier answers. I think in terms of the additional advice that may have come to the Minister for Energy and Resources, I can take that on board, or there may be an opportunity to talk to the minister directly. I am guessing this might be a bit of a theme for you in this PAEC hearing, and I am sure the minister will be able to come prepared with some further information.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you. To your awareness, Premier, are there any projections? Is there any modelling available? What percentage of Victoria's overall electricity consumption will be used by data centres by the end of the forwards?

**Jacinta ALLAN:** That might be one we will have to take on notice as well to see if there is more information we can provide.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** That would be much appreciated. Thank you.

**Jacinta ALLAN:** But I hope we are coming at this from a perspective that there are no doubt some challenges to work through, but there are opportunities that bring enormous investment, opportunity and jobs to our state.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you. To be unequivocal – and I can absolutely go into this in the energy portfolio down the track – will this increase in electricity needed to power these data centres jeopardise our renewable energy targets in Victoria?

**Jacinta ALLAN:** I think it is abundantly clear that our Labor government is firmly committed to the renewable energy industry. We have achieved already some of those targets that we have set, and we will continue to do so. The only risk or threat to the achievement of more renewable energy is the Liberal–National–One Nation coalition, who wants to literally pull the plug on an industry that drives renewable jobs, drives regional jobs and drives energy security. But in terms of the broader questions around approvals for data centres, the Secretary has advised that they are given on the basis of generation being available. So I hope that addresses some of those earlier questions you were asking about the approvals processes, the availability of electricity and so forth.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** I appreciate it. Thank you. I will move on to another matter.

**Jacinta ALLAN:** I am just finding it a bit hard to hear.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Sorry, I will pull this a bit closer.

**Jacinta ALLAN:** No, it is not you.

**The CHAIR:** Excuse me, the Premier is just trying to listen to the question. If members can just keep their chatter down, please.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you. On another matter, as you would be aware, Premier, a while ago first ministers across the country agreed to strengthen gun laws across the nation. They commissioned their relevant police ministers and attorneys-general to develop various options in this space. Can I ask: is there a date when this committee can expect to see legislation regarding restricting access to firearms being introduced to Victoria?

**Jacinta ALLAN:** Out of the national cabinet meeting following that absolutely despicable antisemitic terrorist attack in Bondi in December of last year, there has been work across a range of jurisdictions on the individual states' firearms controls. We are undergoing our own processes, and we will be having more to say in coming weeks about the arrangements here in Victoria, noting that the regulatory framework here in Victoria was different and indeed, I would argue, a stronger regulatory environment for firearms control than what was in place in Bondi prior to that awful and evil attack. I think there was an understanding out of that national cabinet process that each state was in a different place, and each state has committed to working through those matters in their own jurisdiction.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Okay. Just to understand better from my end where things are up to for Victoria, I understand the government commissioned a review of our state's gun laws. That review was led by former Victoria Police chief commissioner Mr Ken Lay. I understand that rapid review has been completed, and the government has now had a report since the start of March. Will that report be released publicly?

**Jacinta ALLAN:** I am not sure I agree with your timelines. In answering your question, I would have to check that.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** You can correct me.

**Jacinta ALLAN:** I would not want to let that stand on the record as the timeline that the report was received. Sorry, what was the second part of your question?

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Will the report be released publicly?

**Jacinta ALLAN:** We are going through the recommendations in that report. We have said that we will respond not just to that report but to the broader settings in coming weeks.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Okay. Can I ask, Premier, have you read the report?

**Jacinta ALLAN:** Yes.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** You have. Okay. Thank you. And if we are talking about potential legislation within this term of Parliament, is there funding in this budget to put any potential reforms into operation?

**Jacinta ALLAN:** That will depend on the government's response.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Okay. I will move on to another matter. Premier, at one of the –

**Jacinta ALLAN:** Oh, yes, there is. Sorry, the Secretary has just reminded me that we have already responded to some previous national cabinet decisions on the national firearms register. There is funding in the budget for those elements. Just for the benefit of the committee, I was reading down your question in the context of that next set of actions, but there is some funding in the budget for previous decisions that have been taken around the national firearms register.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Okay. Much appreciated. I will move on to another matter. Premier, one of the key expressed priorities of this budget is keeping communities safe. Can I ask about our state's bail laws? Obviously these have been reviewed and changed a number of times. Are our current bail laws working as your government has intended?

**Jacinta ALLAN:** The answer is yes, and I am just looking for some data that I might have before me to demonstrate that our intention in strengthening the bail laws was to respond to the deep concern, from listening to too many victims of crime, that we needed to deal with this repeat offending that was causing concern and causing harm. I might not get to it in time in terms of the clock running, but the Attorney will no doubt be able to provide you with additional data on how we have seen an increase in the number of people in jail, not out on bail. You will have seen that as a consequence we have made a decision to open the Malmsbury youth justice facility. We have expanded prison capacity with some budget allocation that we made in last year's budget.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you, Premier. Are there any further changes planned to our bail laws during this term of Parliament?

**Jacinta ALLAN:** We will continue to both listen carefully to victims of crime and take advice from Victoria Police about what further measures we may need to take. I should also note that adult time for violent crime is now in place and also the incredibly important work of the violence reduction unit, which I touched on earlier in my presentation.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr Puglielli. We will go to Mr Hilakari.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Thank you very much, Premier and officials. I am going to take us to some of the multicultural matters related to your portfolio areas, and particularly I will take you to budget paper 3, page 82, and the line item related to 'Making Victoria free from racism'. \$3.4 million has been committed this year to that line item, particularly in reference to antisemitism and Islamophobia and the work that we are doing to make sure that every Victorian feels at home in Victoria and gets the respect that they deserve. I am hoping you can just talk to that line item and what it will mean for Victorians.

**Jacinta ALLAN:** Yes. Thank you, Mr Hilakari, for the opportunity to both talk about the specific budget initiatives that are in the budget but also to sit it in a wider context of where we are today and how we have got to be a community. As I have said earlier, people from around the world are choosing Melbourne and Victoria as the place to raise their families, to start a business and to do the incredible volunteer work that we see so many community members participate in, and I am sure we all see it every single day. And it is the diversity of our community, because whether it is migrants who came here maybe decades ago or indeed families who have come here more recently, they have chosen us, and their contribution has made us better. It has made us stronger. It has made us a more caring society. And that is the real success I think we all see – well, I hope we all see – of multicultural Victoria. And also too that observation – I know again in my own community we have so many health professionals who have chosen central Victoria to practise as workers, doctors, that we would not have a strong GP network without their contribution.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** I met some of those in Point Cook recently from Bendigo.

**Jacinta ALLAN:** You would have. Yes. And I say this at a time when I think speaking out clearly and plainly on these matters is becoming more and more important than ever before, because there are too many politicians who are wanting to talk down the contribution of migrants. They want to talk down that contribution. They want to other the contribution of migrants for their own political outcome, for what they think is their existential crisis around their political future. And that is not who we should be, because our modern Australia, our modern Victoria, is because of our diversity.

And I mentioned before the med tech sector, the medical research sector, the biotech, advanced manufacturing – we are a leader in all of these sectors. We have the best universities, we have the best TAFEs, we have a diverse and strong economy, and all of that is built on people. We have a good resource industry, but we are not a resource industry rich state like some of our other state-based colleagues. And in a lot of those industries their diversity, their strength, their vitality and vibrancy is because of migrants who have come here. They might have come here as international students. They might have come here as parents with kids. They might have come here as grandparents of kids to care for their families. And it is in that context that we all have I think an obligation where some are wanting to drive hate and division for political purposes that we say there is no place for hate in Victoria. It is why we have the strongest anti-hate laws in the country. It is why we have taken strong action on antisemitism, Islamophobia and the attacks we have seen on our Hindu and Sikh communities as just some examples of where we have worked with those communities to strengthen their safety. We will continue to do that, for example, with this budget that invests \$3.4 million for more community-led projects, because that is where we have got to get in, at the community level, and help communities to work together. In that context we also do need to continue to push back on those who are trying to capitalise on this.

And we saw it last night. To think that you would want to cut the age pension of long-term migrants, like the federal Liberal leader does. I wonder if that is also the policy of the Victorian Liberal Party and the National Party. And the reason why I ask this question, and I think the answer to this question is important, is because leadership matters. What you say matters. What you do matters. Standing up for people who may not have the voice or the platform that we are privileged to have as elected representatives is important. What we are seeing from the Liberal Party is it is an us-versus-them world, a Donald Trump-style world, if you like, about conflict, about division, about othering. We know because of the communities, whether we represent them or see them every day, that that is not Victoria and that is not Victorians. We are strong and great because of people who have chosen to live alongside families like mine, very Australian families who have been here since the Gold Rush days. That is the strength of our society, and that is why we need leaders to stand up for communities, not chase One Nation down that extremist pathway or to save a few votes to claw back.

There is an opportunity here for everyone to show leadership, and I implore everyone to stand up for communities. Go and talk to your migrant communities. Go and hear the fear and concern that they are expressing to you about what this period of division is doing to them, to their families and to their kids. And let us recognise that there is a moment here that we should be seizing as leaders and working to fight back against that hate and division, because our community needs it more now than ever.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Premier, you mentioned just a moment ago threats to the old age pension. We actually do the opposite thing in Victoria; we support older people from multicultural backgrounds. I will take you to the same page reference and to ‘Support for Victoria’s multicultural seniors’. We have got a commitment of \$5.4 million to support, I would have thought, somewhere around 1000 multicultural communities with that sort of funding. How is that supporting our older multicultural communities, particularly those people who are feeling isolated, moving from somewhere to somewhere new? How does this money support those communities?

**Jacinta ALLAN:** Well, it does. It recognises that that can be a challenge when you are moving into a new community, making new connections. You have done it for family reasons often, because you want to be with your family, you want to be with loved ones. And again, anyone with kids knows the enormous value and assistance you get from your parents who are helping with the family responsibilities. This also goes to respect; it goes to dignity and recognition as well. And you are right, that is why there is \$5.3 million in the budget for the Multicultural Seniors Support Program. This will provide what on paper sounds like quite a small grant: \$2000 grants to around 1000 multicultural organisations.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** In my community they stretch it a long way.

**Jacinta ALLAN:** Yes, and it is powerful, right?

**Mathew HILAKARI:** That's right.

**Jacinta ALLAN:** You are right. It is not just stretched a long way. It is powerful because it funds activities that reduce that isolation that you spoke of in your question about moving to a new community. It is about building stronger community connections. As I am talking, I am reminded of visiting the Point Cook community centre and seeing some of those seniors groups in action.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Room to room it was quite easy to see how supported they are.

**Jacinta ALLAN:** I mentioned the member for Ashwood earlier today. I met with a Chinese seniors association group in his community, where again these activities and programs are absolutely fundamental to keeping people connected. We also know when people are connected to community, to culture, to family, there is a great health and wellbeing outcome there as well, which is good for families and good for everyone. This is just another really practical way that we can help families and help migrant communities help older migrant members of our community. And again, the contrast could not be starker with the alternative approach, which is to not show that respect, to not show that regard, and even worse, to use older migrants as a political weapon – use them to divide. I find that despicable and disgraceful. Again, there is a responsibility I feel really deeply to speak up and support our migrant communities.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** I would say we are the most successful multicultural community in all of the world.

**Jacinta ALLAN:** We are.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** It is something we should be completely proud of. I am going to move to the other end of the age spectrum, to young people and budget paper 3 again, page 13. There is a line item for \$28.5 million for 'English as an Additional Language'. How is that supporting our students who are learning English and making sure they have got the best chances to build a great life in Australia?

**Jacinta ALLAN:** You are right. It is coming to the younger end of the age spectrum, but your point about how this continues to ensure that we remain a strong, successful, multicultural, multifaith community is by both supporting older members of our community, making sure that we have got the great schools and hospitals so everyone can access those services, and then ensuring that our youngest citizens have the opportunity to remain connected to language and culture, and it also give others the opportunity to learn language and culture as well, because that is most certainly how you continue to foster and strengthen those bonds of diversity and to understand each other's culture and faith, building and strengthening that social fabric. This is a program that will go into 197 kindergartens to teach 21 languages. I am sure all of us would love to go and see this. When we see this in action, it will be incredible to watch young learners learning different languages. But again, I should also make the point it is looking at how to incorporate language into play, music and art and singing, dancing and stories.

I also just want to take a moment to reference how the budget is providing some funding to support students from migrant and refugee backgrounds to stay engaged in education. I am sure many of us are familiar with the Centre for Multicultural Youth. It is an incredible organisation, as is Foundation House. Well, they are working in collaboration with the Catholic Education Commission and Independent Schools Victoria to deliver the refugee education support program. These are going to be clusters around government and non-government schools to provide, again, local strategies, really local engagement to improve engagement and wellbeing outcomes for students from refugee backgrounds. You mentioned earlier the challenge of coming from one place to settle into a new community. If you are coming from a refugee experience, that comes with some particular additional challenges, so how we can support younger people particularly and then also keep them connected to school is going to be really important.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** I am going to take a different track and go to 'Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions' on page 62, where it sets out \$353.9 million for this year, positioning Victoria to grow our economy and also delivering fair and secure jobs. How are we setting ourselves up to grow the economy through this budget?

**Jacinta ALLAN:** I have mentioned a couple of times today how Victoria's economy is growing: it is strong, it is resilient and it is robust. And we have a people-based economy; we are not a resource-rich economy. We do have a good resource sector, and critical minerals is an area that we are looking to do even more in. We have got billions of dollars of gas exploration, for example, going on right now. We have got, I have mentioned too, the renewable energy sector that is an investment opportunity. Because of this diversity we are seeing our economy growing. And also too, something that members of the committee might not be aware of is that we have grown faster than any other state in the last decade. I think in my presentation earlier I referenced the 300,000 jobs that have been created here in Victoria in just the last three years. That too is the biggest growth of any state in the nation. This again is because of people. It is because people are choosing here. Business investment is up as well: 44 per cent since 2020, 123,000 more businesses since 2020. More businesses, more employment, more jobs, more economic security, which goes to that cost-of-living conversation we were having earlier about providing that economic security for people in the pay packets going home at the end of every week.

That is why we have got to continue to work hard to ensure that the conditions and settings are right to continue to support that growth, whether it is the free TAFE opportunities, ensuring we have got a skilled workforce; the support we provide to our world-leading universities; the work in having good services people rely on, like access to health care when they need it, access to education for kids. It all goes to having those settings right, and also how we have backed that in with the work we have done through our budget in delivering the fiscal strategy that is delivering the surplus, reducing debt as a share of the economy, but using that strength to then continue to invest. And this is an important point, because you cannot take \$40 billion out of the Victorian, budget. You are taking that out of the Victorian economy. You are taking that out of the Victorian community. And going hard and fast in that way risks our economic security, risks our economic growth.

Now I appreciate from the murmurings of other members of the committee that that is a thing that sits uncomfortably with Liberal–National members of the committee, because it is something that people in the community are concerned about as well. But to support economic growth, we have got to continue, from a government perspective, to make sure that we invest in the things that people rely on and then have the settings right to attract investment. And we have got some great examples of investment attraction in recent times. Mondelēz, otherwise known as Cadbury –

**Mathew HILAKARI:** I believe somebody here knows about that in their community.

**Jacinta ALLAN:** with the opening of the largest distribution store in the world in Truganina, which is something incredible to behold –

**Mathew HILAKARI:** We love our chocolate.

**The CHAIR:** You need to put on record, Premier, the most popular chocolate of Australians.

**Jacinta ALLAN:** It is absolutely incredible. But also too, I have spent a bit of time talking about those investments that come from renewable energy, from data centres. Housing, alongside making sure that we are building more homes, and we are building more homes than any other state, is also bringing more investment. And that is why having the development facilitation program pathway for housing projects, for renewable energy projects, for other investments, streamlined planning processes – again, we have had some opposition from the Liberal–National parties to our streamlined planning processes. Well, this is how you also support economic growth. And at the heart of that are workers, are jobs, who rely on those pay packets going home at the end of every week.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** I just want to take us to the Victorian business investment, which has risen by more than 13 per cent.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr Hilakari. Just for the record, it is the Cherry Ripe, according to Mondelēz, that is the most popular chocolate of Victorians and Australians.

*Members interjecting.*

**Jacinta ALLAN:** Not in our household. That is controversial.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Is that on the record?

**The CHAIR:** There, I have said it.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Are we putting that on the record? Is that true?

**The CHAIR:** You would never guess it. Premier and officials, thank you very much for taking the time to appear before the committee today. The committee will follow up any questions taken on notice in writing, and responses are required within five working days of the committee's request.

The committee is going to take a break before beginning its consideration of the equality portfolio at 5 pm. I declare this hearing adjourned.

**Witnesses withdrew.**