

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2025-26 Budget Estimates

Melbourne – Tuesday 3 June 2025

MEMBERS

Sarah Connolly – Chair

Nicholas McGowan – Deputy Chair

Jade Benham

Michael Galea

Mathew Hilakari

Lauren Kathage

Aiv Puglielli

Meng Heang Tak

Richard Welch

WITNESSES

Vicki Ward MP, Minister for Emergency Services;

Kate Houghton, Secretary,

Kate Fitzgerald, Deputy Secretary, Emergency Management,

Corinne Cadilhac, Deputy Secretary, Corporate Services and Infrastructure, and

Samuel Ho, Chief Financial Officer, Department of Justice and Community Safety;

Timothy Wiebusch, Acting Emergency Management Commissioner, and

Jenni Rigby, Chief Executive, Emergency Management Victoria; and

Mariela Diaz, Chief Executive Officer, Emergency Recovery Victoria.

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

I ask that mobile telephones please be turned to silent.

On behalf of the Parliament, the committee is conducting this Inquiry into the 2025–26 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 is protected by parliamentary privilege. However, any comments repeated outside of this hearing may not be protected by this privilege.

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

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

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

I welcome the Minister for Emergency Services the Honourable Vicki Ward as well as officials from DJCS. Minister, I am going to invite you to make an opening statement or presentation of no more than 5 minutes, after which time the committee will ask you questions. Your time starts now.

Vicki WARD: Thank you, Chair. Thank you to the committee for the opportunity to present on the emergency services portfolio, including our government's investments through the 2025–26 Victorian state budget. And bear with me – I have got a cold, so my voice goes in and out. I do not mean to, so apologies. I acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land which we are on today, the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation, their elders past and present, and recognise more than 60,000 years of care for culture and land.

Visual presentation.

Vicki WARD: Like many countries around the world, Victoria is experiencing emergencies that are increasing in frequency and intensity. The 2025 high-risk weather season was a really good example of this. The State Control Centre was activated for a total of 203 days over summer, and 2248 warnings were issued to the Victorian community via VicEmergency. I am sure the committee needs no reminding that emergency events over last summer included fires, heatwaves, storms and, incredibly, a fire season that extended into May for some parts of the state.

During the height of the Yarram Gap fire in the Grampians National Park between 24 December and 25 January over 1000 firefighters and incident control personnel were involved in the response, including over

200 volunteers and staff from interstate, and we thank them for that. I would just like to take this opportunity to acknowledge all of the communities who have been affected by these fires. They went on for such a long time and were really challenging. I also really want to thank those people who form our emergency services, who all came together and worked incredibly hard to keep Victorians and their properties safe.

On slide 3, our government will always make sure that the emergency services Victorians count on have the funding that they need. We have doubled the annual output investment over the last decade in the face of more storms, more fires and more floods. Funding provided in the year's budget continues this investment trajectory, making sure that our hardworking emergency services personnel continue to have the resources they need so that communities can respond and recover from these emergency events.

Now go to slide 4: we are building on the \$200 million investment provided through the mid-year budget update, and we have got over \$200 million in new funding for the emergency services portfolio. Key areas for investment over the forward estimates include \$75.3 million to equip our emergency services organisations with the facilities and fleet they need to protect communities, \$48.9 million to boost capacity and capability of our emergency services, \$55.9 million to support the vital work of our emergency services volunteers and \$26.1 million to keep Victorians safe and protect communities.

On slide 5 we see that through Fire Rescue Victoria's rolling fleet replacement initiative \$40 million is being provided to kickstart a rolling replacement program for vital appliances that support Fire Rescue Victoria's firefighting capacity.

\$20.8 million is provided through the building more Country Fire Authority stations initiative for two new satellite Country Fire Authority stations – these will be at Wendouree and Hampton Park – and will deliver new and upgraded stations in Winnindoo, Hoddles Creek, Dartmoor, Leitchville, Kinglake West, Raywood and Yarram. And the delivering a new Victoria State Emergency Service Footscray unit initiative will provide \$14.5 million for construction of a new Victoria State Emergency Service Footscray unit to support emergency response and recovery.

The better protecting Fire Rescue Victoria from cybersecurity threats initiative will see government invest \$17.5 million to strengthen cybersecurity to better protect Fire Rescue Victoria's information management system from threats. The backing Triple Zero Victoria to meet demand initiative will provide \$24.7 million to increase capacity for Triple Zero Victoria to continue to meet demand. The strengthening Marine Search and Rescue and delivering new vessels initiative will also provide \$6.8 million to strengthen support for marine search and rescue training and operations and deliver two new vessels.

The government is committed to supporting our dedicated volunteers who keep Victorians safe. The boosting Victoria's capability and capacity to respond to critical incidents initiative will provide \$2.8 million to support Victoria's emergency incident management teams and state and regional controllers. The further supporting our emergency services and volunteers initiative will provide \$53.1 million to support emergency services and volunteers. This will ensure that they have the tools and the resources they need to keep Victorians safe, and it builds on the \$200 million provided in last year's budget update for the supporting emergency services and volunteers initiative, including funding to double the volunteer emergency services equipment program, VESEP.

In the face of increasing emergencies, our government is fundamentally committed to keeping Victorians safe. Funding for the annual Victorian fire season campaign will continue, with \$13.9 million provided for the campaign, and this is to support all Victorians to be better prepared against the threat of bush and grass fire and keep communities safer, while \$10.4 million has been provided for the State Control Centre to deliver its critical 24/7 functions in support of the emergency services sector. As the acting EMC knows better than anyone else, the State Control Centre is Victoria's primary control centre for emergency management and is the hub of a network of regional control and incident control centres across the state. This funding will ensure the State Control Centre has the resources it needs to provide effective coordination and control before, after and during emergencies.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. The first 7 minutes are going to Mr Welch.

Richard WELCH: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister. Minister, I refer to budget paper 3, page 70. In there I note that \$17.4 million has been allocated over the next three years for cybersecurity upgrades at Fire

Rescue Victoria. This is on top of some \$32 million reported on IT recovery consultancies in the FRV annual report following the 2022 cyber attack. Why is another \$17.4 million required to complete this project in the first part, and will it fix the IT issues for good?

Vicki WARD: Thank you very much for your question, Mr Welch. I appreciate that, with your background, this would be something that you would have a particular interest in. The ransomware attack on FRV a couple of years ago was a real reminder that cyberthreats are very, very real and they are very problematic. FRV responded very quickly and got operations up as quickly as they could. But as you would know, with malware, you have ongoing challenges that can be presented. So there is a degree of consultation that is needed as you fix, repair and rebuild your system, but there is also investment that needs to come in to secure your system but also help train, look after, modify and work with those people who are using the system. So there is a whole approach that has to happen here that is building and also ensuring those who use it. So the \$17.4 million that you referred to will deliver funding for increased cybersecurity capabilities, and it will help ensure Fire Rescue Victoria are as strong as they can be in terms of resisting any cybersecurity attack malware that they may have while also ensuring that those people who are working at FRV are absolutely well trained and equipped to ensure that they avoid falling into those very easy traps that we can see being set by people who have nefarious purposes when they want to access systems.

Richard WELCH: Thank you, Minister. And is that \$17 million therefore to complete the project or is it new work under new contracts?

Vicki WARD: It is continuing the work.

Richard WELCH: So the original budget for that work was insufficient.

Vicki WARD: This is a cybersecurity uplift program, and it will deliver technology, people and processes uplifts. It will focus on tactical defences to cyber attacks along with improved government and education, as I said. The associate secretary may have some more that she may wish to respond to.

Kate FITZGERALD: The funding that FRV has already expended in relation to cybersecurity experts was really about identifying and diagnosing the original causes associated with a cyber incident.

Richard WELCH: That is the \$32 million.

Kate FITZGERALD: I would have to take that on notice in terms of the funding provided previously. It has obviously taken time to understand the complexity of the attack on FRV's systems. They have used that expertise to be able to identify those problems. Now, as the minister outlined, the \$17.44 million announced in the 2025–26 budget is about bolstering the network security, improving access management controls and data security, implementing organisational security policies and processes and increasing employer cybersecurity knowledge and awareness. I would characterise it as the next stage of the project for FRV to be able to harden up their information and communications technology against cyber threats.

Vicki WARD: I think it is also worth noting that it will establish a central governance and delivery team that will help coordinate the entire program.

Richard WELCH: Yes. I think it would be useful – and I am happy to take it on notice – to clarify the \$32 million. What was the scope of that? The \$17 million – is this an expansion of that scope or is it cost overruns of that scope? Where is the line between the original work and the new work?

Vicki WARD: Well, the \$35 million that you refer to was in previous budgets, which would have been the remit of previous PAECs to actually investigate that money spent. We can look to give you what information we can around the \$17 million that we have invested in this coming budget. We can certainly see what is available that we can give to you to help you better understand that.

Richard WELCH: I can get that on notice?

Kate FITZGERALD: Yes. Just to be clear and to expand on what the minister said, they are different phases of the project. The original funding that was committed by FRV in relation to expertise was around diagnosis. The funding that has now been identified is about the treatment and the uplifting of their system.

There is not necessarily a relationship between those two in terms of cost overruns or insufficient funding initially or so on.

Richard WELCH: I understand. I think that is what I am curious about because \$32 million is a very, very high figure to diagnose a problem and then only roughly half of that to solve it.

Vicki WARD: I think though too, Mr Welch, that unless you have actually seen the scope and the extent of the malware and how it has been embedded within a system, it is difficult to predict how much money it would actually cost to repair, to ensure security, to patch up but also to have the resources that are there – I am sure with your experience you are well aware of this. You can go through and you can clean up your malware, but then some time later something else appears, like there is a glitch or there is a bit in it that you have not seen before or that you have not been aware of that then requires additional scope to actually patch up and to repair. Malware by its very nature is very intrusive, it is very difficult to manage, and it creates problems.

Richard WELCH: Thank you. I agree, Minister. I agree. But I think the community would be reassured to know that this is not becoming another Myki project. Will this extra \$17 million solve it?

Vicki WARD: I see where you are going with what you are referring to with the Myki, but I think that talking about trying to ensure that FRV have got the strongest capabilities that they have got but that you are also addressing the challenges – the very real challenges that come with malware are quite a different scenario. I do not think that it is really fair on the systems, and I think it does your own knowledge and experience a bit of a disservice in trying to compare the two. I think that the work that they have been doing with FRV has been really important. It is really complicated work, as you well understand. We are employing people here in Australia at Australian rates to do this work. It is not, you know, something that we are spending a great deal of time on in terms of cost cutting because it has been outsourced to an overseas organisation. We need to make sure that we have got the strongest supports, the strongest protections, embedded in the system.

Richard WELCH: Yes, I agree with that. But can you reassure the public that it will be solved now? There was a report in the *Age* two days ago –

The CHAIR: Apologies, Mr Welch. We are going to go straight to Ms Kathage.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you, Chair, Minister and officials. In your presentation you were just finishing up about the State Control Centre, and I can see on page 70 of budget paper 3 there is funding there for that. Can you speak a bit to the role of that State Control Centre – I know the Premier mentioned visiting it and how invigorating that is – and how that funding on page 70 is going to help emergency response in Victoria?

Vicki WARD: I can, and with your indulgence, in my response to you I might then give the Acting Emergency Management Commissioner a chance to talk to it as well, if he wishes to. We will see how we go for time. But I know it is a place that he enjoys working in and has enjoyed working in for a long time.

Thank you for your question and for your interest in the State Control Centre. It is a place that you can really nerd out on. The first day that I was sworn in I went up to the State Control Centre because the Grampians fire had only just started two days previously, and it was extraordinary to see everything that was working – all of the moving parts, all of the people who were there doing their own thing quietly, beavering away, with this absolute context of calmness. But this incredible degree of knowledge that is there, this incredible degree of insight, this skill set is really remarkable, and as Victorians we should be immensely proud of the professionalism that we see at our State Control Centre.

It was a pretty unique experience, getting sworn in two days after a really big fire hit, but it has been an amazing experience and I feel incredibly lucky to hold this portfolio. It brings together individuals from a really wide range of emergency services agencies alongside the dedicated Victorian public service surge staff, who all work seamlessly as one team. You have a core roster that works through 24/7 at the State Control Centre, but when there is an emergency, you see a surge. You see people from different agencies come in, but you also see people from the public service come in, whether it is DFFH, whether it is DEECA – different agencies that are needed. They managed a very demanding and complex summer, and I really want to thank them for their work. It was marked by widespread and dangerous bushfires across the state. It really serves as a powerful reminder of the critical role that the SCC plays. Even when it is not dealing with a crisis, it fosters collaboration, it builds capability, and then, when it is called upon, it all just comes together. It is an amazing machine. You would see

this yourself. You go in there, and there are people who have not seen each other since the last fire season who are having a bit of a chat. It is really amazing how collaborative this space is. Everybody is there to make sure that they are looking out for each other.

The SCC is Victoria's primary control centre for managing state-level emergencies, and it is designed to play a critical role in emergency mitigation planning, preparedness, response, relief and recovery. It coordinates a wide spectrum of agencies across the state. You have got class 1, class 2 and class 3 emergencies; fire and flood are class 1, energy, water and wildlife issues are class 2 and so on. Because the SCC is so central, this is why we are investing \$10.4 million in this budget to ensure that it continues to deliver its crucial 24/7 support during the management of emergencies. It really is key that it is there to operate 24/7 because we do need to have that instant response. Now, it does provide intelligence and mapping, which during an emergency – especially one that is rapidly changing in a dynamic fire like the one we saw with the Grampians – is crucial to assist those on the ground. Another key 24/7 function is the public information and warnings and having that crucially clear and correct information for all of those who are affected by a storm or a flood.

By investing in the SCC we are ensuring that these core functions are available around the clock, and this \$10.4 million will guarantee this intelligence and mapping. You will have the Bureau of Meteorology sitting at one desk, and they are mapping out and they are doing things, and then you will have somebody sitting at the desk here, and they have just gone through the aerial footage that has come through from the night before that talks to a heat map and where a fire is moving. You have got this amazing overlay of people's expertise that really helps you understand, as best can be, where a fire is going to go and what it is going to do.

During emergencies, especially larger campaign fires, the SCC supports a range of other functions, including logistics, resources, planning and consequence, lessons management and aviation services through the state air desk. There is a lot more. Do you want to drill down into the details?

Timothy WIEBUSCH: Thanks, Minister. I guess I could give a real practical example of the SCC in action. Members might remember back to the Montrose fire. It is a really good example of something that was occurring where our firefighters on the ground had done a terrific job up until 8 pm that evening of being able to control the intensity of that fire. We were expecting relatively benign conditions overnight, but at 11:30 on that evening we saw some unexpected winds and a downburst that ended up with an ember storm starting to impact Monbulk and the surrounding community.

That is where the SCC comes to the fore. The 24/7 team was immediately able to swing into action and produce a watch-and-act warning in the middle of the night whilst the incident management team was being recalled. Then throughout the early hours of the morning, emergency warnings were starting to be issued to those communities through the VicEmergency app. We had a fire behaviour analyst that was working in the centre that could convey to the incident controller and the divisional commander out on the ground where the fire spread was likely to go. Then we had the intelligence function, as the minister has already mentioned, engaging directly with our aviation that was up that night and being able to look at where the spot fires were occurring in people's backyards and around their homes. The SCC was really critical in an example like Montrose – and I could give many others there as well – in supporting incident controllers and divisional commanders, which ultimately then direct the fire trucks and the crews on the ground as to where they need to be. In my view, I guess inevitably that led to the crews knowing where they needed to be and saved many, many more properties on that evening.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you. That funding, Minister, that is listed there, I guess it talks to Emergency Management Victoria and the Emergency Management Commissioner role, but are there other elements that are funded?

The CHAIR: Apologies, Ms Kathage. We will go to Ms Benham.

Jade BENHAM: Thank you, Chair. Evening, Minister.

Vicki WARD: Evening.

Jade BENHAM: What is the budget for the CFA for 2025–26?

Vicki WARD: The budget for the CFA for 2024–26 –

Jade BENHAM: No, 2025–26.

Vicki WARD: I am so sorry; I misheard you. I have not only got crap in my nose, it is in my ears as well. What we see with this CFA budget – the components of the budget this year that are there to support the CFA are multifold. What I want to do is firstly really talk to – and I know that you share this as well – the gratitude for the work that CFA volunteers do. It is really extraordinary how they are always there to be relied on.

Jade BENHAM: Sorry, Minister, in the interest of time – I have got really limited time. We know that the Act requires the Treasurer to consider the funding requirements for funding recipients before setting the rates for the emergency services volunteer fund –

Vicki WARD: I am so sorry. I am dead serious when I say my ears are blocked. I am just going to have to get you to slow down. I am so sorry.

The CHAIR: Ms Benham, bring the microphone closer.

Jade BENHAM: Sure. That is the first time anyone has ever said that to me.

The Act requires the Treasurer to consider the funding requirements for funding recipients before setting the rates for the emergency services volunteer fund. The rates were set on Friday, so what was the budget figure that the CFA provided the department to allow the Treasurer to set the rate?

Vicki WARD: Well, that would have been a conversation between Treasury and the CFA. That maybe would have been a question to –

Jade BENHAM: Secretary.

Kate HOUGHTON: The Associate Secretary, to add to this: it is a forecast estimate of the budget for all the ESOs that are under the levy. It is a forecast, so it does not include all of the funding, and there are some exclusions, which I think both the Treasurer and the Premier went to earlier today.

Jade BENHAM: Are they separated between agencies?

Kate FITZGERALD: Each agency has different exclusions in relation to their budget, so at this time of the financial year, we have not fully set the agencies' budgets for the next financial year. What DTF has calculated the forecast on, for the purposes of the ESVF, is the forecast estimate budgets for each agency –

Jade BENHAM: So what was the CFA forecast?

Kate FITZGERALD: but we know it is per the gazettal rate.

Jade BENHAM: So it is per the gazetted rate.

Kate FITZGERALD: What that gazettal rate excludes is a range of things.

Vicki WARD: Which is not the full funding that is available to the CFA.

Kate FITZGERALD: The gazettal rate excludes the investment that the government has made through the supporting emergency services volunteer initiative in the midyear update and also in further supporting our emergency services volunteers in the 2025–26 budget, so that is totalling more than \$250 million.

Vicki WARD: As I think has been made clear, Ms Benham, the funding for the ESVF announced in 'Supporting our emergency services and volunteers' in the 2024–25 budget update and further supporting emergency services volunteers in the 2025–26 budget, totalling more than \$250 million – as this funding was held in contingency, subject to the ESV legislation passing, it has not yet passed through the relevant agencies and departments. So that is not in the figure that you are talking about.

Other funding committed in the budget but not yet passed on to agencies and departments does not include funding received from the Commonwealth or other state government departments. Funding agencies contribute to whole-of-sector services, such as the Valuing Volunteers program, the emergency management operational communications program or Triple Zero Victoria – so all funding that is held in trust by the agency or the

department, or funding for unexpected or unforeseen needs. So our emergency services will be fully funded in the next financial year, and as you have heard from both the Treasurer and the Premier, there is nearly \$2 billion of investment in our emergency services for the upcoming budget. This is double what was received when we came into government – it is double that amount – and it is also more than double what was –

Jade BENHAM: So what is the base funding for the CFA next year?

Vicki WARD: It is also more than double –

Jade BENHAM: Just a figure.

Vicki WARD: It is also more than double –

Jade BENHAM: I just want the base funding for the CFA.

Vicki WARD: It is also more than double the figure that was around when the last year of the Liberal coalition government came in –

Jade BENHAM: Is the base funding what has been gazetted?

Vicki WARD: The money that we are providing in the emergency services portfolio is more than double that funding. So it is very clear –

Jade BENHAM: So what is the figure? What is the base figure?

Vicki WARD: It is very clear that there is funding for our emergency services in this budget.

Jade BENHAM: Yes, but not very clear on what the CFA base funding is. Secretary, have the CFA, SES or FRV been advised of their budgets for 2025–26?

Kate HOUGHTON: The process for that is done before the end of the financial year. We are working with them until 30 June to work through their final budgets.

Jade BENHAM: So no?

Kate HOUGHTON: As the minister has just said, these are forecast estimates of the budget by which the rates in the gazettal are set. The minister has also set through what is not included in that gazettal rate – not rate, but the forecast estimates of their base funding.

Jade BENHAM: We are into June now. When will they be advised of what their budgets are?

Kate HOUGHTON: It is standard process that they will have their budgets settled before the start of the next financial year.

Vicki WARD: But what your questions have not anticipated, whether it was this morning to the Treasurer or whether it was this afternoon to the Premier, is that the very nature of emergency services is that you put forward what you estimate will be a general amount that is needed but you know that there is other money that is also required for your emergency services to operate because of the changing conditions that they experience and the things that they have.

Jade BENHAM: Yes, but in the interests of time – this is budget estimates, Minister.

Vicki WARD: Now, it will be reported in the annual reports for each agency. Following the annual reports –

Jade BENHAM: Surely you must have an estimate of what the budgets are. This is the very reason we are here – to give an estimate.

Vicki WARD: Well, as I have said to you –

Jade BENHAM: In the interest of time I just want to get to the figure of what the estimated budget is that you are giving them.

Kate FITZGERALD: I think if I can just add: we work through that process now with the agencies – with each agency – to confirm their estimated budgets for the next financial year. We reconcile the provision of funding by the state government at the end of a financial year, and it is published in their annual report. So at this stage of any financial year, regardless of whether we have the ESVF or the fire services property levy, we would not yet have finalised the ESOs' final budget for the next financial year because we have to incorporate all of those things that we have stepped through in terms of being able to identify and finalise with the agencies –

Jade BENHAM: So are you refusing to answer the question, or have estimates not been done coming into budget estimates?

Vicki WARD: No, this is the process that has been established since the Liberal and National coalition government brought in the fire fund in, what, 2012.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. We are going to move on. We are going to go to Mr Hilakari.

Mathew HILAKARI: Thank you so much, Minister and officials, for your attendance this evening. We have got a little bit to go but not too long. I am going to go to the State Emergency Service. We have had a new facility open up in Point Cook, which is just amazing. It is full of volunteers and is such a good attribute to the community. But I will take us to the new Footscray SES, which is outlined in the budget in budget paper 3, page 78. I am interested both in what that is going to deliver for the community of Footscray but also how that can fit in with the wider west, because we know how much SES services as well as the broad emergency services work with each other.

Vicki WARD: Thank you. I imagine you probably want to talk about Footscray SES.

Mathew HILAKARI: You could talk about Point Cook as well. I would appreciate that as well.

Vicki WARD: It is significant. \$14.5 million is a significant investment to put into this SES unit that will go into Maidstone. There has been pretty incredible work to get to the point where we are able to build this new facility, and it will look amazing, because the new SES buildings that have been going in, the units – as is the one in your community – are really great. It is amazing to see how much volunteers really love the facilities that they have got and how quickly they fill them up – storage is gone pretty quickly, very quickly.

Mathew HILAKARI: They have got a lot of pride in those facilities, the new ones.

Vicki WARD: Yes. I do want to really thank the volunteers of the Footscray VICSES unit, because we know that they have been busy in recent years. They are incredibly dedicated people, and I really want to give a shout-out to their dedicated unit controller Mike Bagnall for his work and for his leadership in working with a unit that is really inclusive, that is hardworking and that has a long history. Now, all SES volunteers across our state really do form the backbone of our emergency response capabilities. They turn up to pretty much everything, and I am so grateful that they do, because their work is really extraordinary and the diversity of what they do is remarkable.

I think we all would have seen Footscray VICSES volunteers rescuing stranded residents as their homes became inundated with the Maribyrnong floods that we saw. We saw floods across the state in 2020, but for them the flooding in Maribyrnong kept them incredibly busy. I am sure that we are not the only ones who are grateful for that; I am sure that plenty of residents in that community are too. I also want to recognise Katie Hall for her absolute advocacy in this. She has spoken to me about it, and Mike has, but it is VICSES who have really decided that this is an important one for them to focus on and to make sure that it does get built. For the past 11 years it has operated out of a temporary facility within the Maribyrnong City Council works depot, and it is just not fit for purpose, particularly if we want to have a growing VICSES, which we do. It is functional, but it was not really designed to support the scale or complexity of the work that they do. You might correct me, Acting Commissioner, but I do not think they have got great toilets and I do not think they are particularly great toilets for women.

Timothy WIEBUSCH: No. That is true.

Vicki WARD: I think it is one of the issues that they have got. With significant upgrades of stations across the state – and earlier this year I was at Fawkner SES, which is pretty amazing. While there are some very proud MPs in those seats of Broadmeadows and Pascoe Vale, having a walk-through, having a look at the space that they have got, space is important. It is important for storage but it is also important for accessibility. It is important to have units that are accessible to anybody who may want to volunteer with Victoria SES. It is important to make sure, as I said, that there is storage but also that there is a proper turnout space, that there is the ability to have meeting rooms where you can meet but also undergo training operations.

But also we hear across CFA and SES talk about the family atmosphere that they have. This is where these spaces are really important for them to be able to gather, but you also want to be able to have a space where lockers have got a space to be, where turnout gear has got a space to go and where people can get changed in a way that is comfortable for them. This is exactly what we are delivering with the new units that we are building, and that includes the \$14.5 million one that we will build at Footscray – well, in Maidstone. It has got more space, better equipment and dedicated training areas. They will be able to respond more quickly and efficiently to emergencies such as floods, storms and road rescues; provide better support to other emergency services across Melbourne's inner west and CBD; deliver community education programs on emergency preparedness and safety; and host training sessions for both volunteers and community members. We have got around 40 active volunteers, but I know that they will be able to grow with the new facility we will build in Maidstone, because when you have got room, that means you have got room for more volunteers, and there are so many of our SES units across the state who do have waiting lists for people who want to volunteer with them. It is such a great organisation to join; it really is. It is such an inclusive, wonderful organisation that I think that Footscray SES will have people queueing up and knocking on the door.

This \$14.5 million investment means that we will be backing Footscray VICSES. It means that we will have so many more hands on deck during emergencies that there will be shorter response times and a broader spread of community knowledge and preparedness, because they are incredibly community minded, the SES. I am really proud of this investment, and I reckon the Member for Footscray is too.

Mathew HILAKARI: I bet she is. I look forward to hearing about it in the Parliament. I just want to take you, with the time we have left, to the Victorian emergency services equipment program, if you can give a quick shout-out for it, because all of our emergency services love it.

Vicki WARD: Absolutely. Everyone get ready to do your letters of support. Well, this is the guy I think you have got to buy brownies for. As Acting Commissioner I think you have a role in helping to decide where that goes. But anyway, the VESEP grants are really, really popular, and there is a reason for that: they are popular because they give brigades and units within SES and CFA not full autonomy but an ability to actually say, 'This is what we need. This is the kind of thing that we want for us that will help us go about doing what we want.' And that can also be reflective of the community that they are and that they represent and the membership that they have got. So, you know, there are different facilities and there are different – oh, sorry.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. We are going to go to the Deputy Chair.

Nick McGOWAN: Thank you. Minister, how many appliances does FRV have at the moment?

Vicki WARD: Are you talking about firefighting appliances, support vehicles –

Nick McGOWAN: Firefighting appliances.

Vicki WARD: There are around 250.

Nick McGOWAN: Two hundred and fifty?

Vicki WARD: Yes.

Nick McGOWAN: Two hundred and fifty. Okay. I will move on to another question then. The \$40 million to replace – you have put here – 19 heavy pumpers and four ladder platforms, is that correct?

Vicki WARD: I am sorry –

Nick McGOWAN: Nineteen heavy pumpers and four ladder platforms at \$40 million. Who came up with that figure in terms of 19 heavy pumpers and four ladder platforms?

Vicki WARD: Well, appliances are something that are decided by FRV. They go about deciding what they need to have and where they need to go.

Nick McGOWAN: Yes, but you are the minister.

Vicki WARD: Yes, but I am not a firefighter.

Nick McGOWAN: Well, no-one is suggesting you are a firefighter, Minister. So the 19 heavy pumpers, how many litres do they pump?

Vicki WARD: Well, it depends on the appliance. And it depends on how –

Nick McGOWAN: A heavy pumper.

Vicki WARD: Well, it depends on what it is plugged into and what the water pressure is and how far away the articulated water pressure is.

Nick McGOWAN: So how many litres does a heavy pumper hold?

Vicki WARD: I am sorry?

Nick McGOWAN: How many litres does a heavy pumper hold? It is simple.

Vicki WARD: How many litres does a heavy pumper hold?

Nick McGOWAN: Correct.

Vicki WARD: Well, it processes around about 2500 litres.

Nick McGOWAN: Two thousand litres, Minister. Do you know how many litres it actually processes in a minute?

A member interjected.

Vicki WARD: It is bizarre. And can you tell me –

Nick McGOWAN: They are simple operational questions. You are the one ordering these –

Vicki WARD: It is a simple operational question, but –

Nick McGOWAN: This is not an operational question. If you do not know the answer to these questions –

Vicki WARD: I did not realise that I was in training to be a firefighter, Mr McGowan.

Nick McGOWAN: Any minister worth her salt should know the answer to these questions.

Vicki WARD: You might want to give me a budget paper reference that actually helps you facilitate your questioning around –

Nick McGOWAN: So, Minister, you cannot tell me the duty point.

The CHAIR: Excuse me, Mr McGowan.

Nick McGOWAN: You cannot tell me how many litres –

Vicki WARD: Mr McGowan, it is up to you how you wish to spend your time here today around going about this budget.

Nick McGOWAN: It is up to you, Minister. If you do not have the answers and you are embarrassed, just say so. I will ask the Secretary if you are embarrassed.

Vicki WARD: I do not know that this actually talks to the Victorian budget that we have presented here and are discussing today, Mr McGowan. Now, if you want to create a gendered conversation around whether a female minister would know –

Nick McGOWAN: This is a serious conversation.

Vicki WARD: Well, it is a serious conversation, Mr McGowan. And I actually think that you are trying to –

Nick McGOWAN: Perhaps you could answer the question then.

Vicki WARD: No, I actually think that you –

Nick McGOWAN: If you do not know the answer, just say so.

Vicki WARD: No, Mr McGowan, you can continue to keep –

The CHAIR: One moment, thank you, Minister. Deputy Chair, you will treat the minister and other people sitting across from us with the respect that they deserve. If you have a question –

Nick McGOWAN: Firefighters' lives are on the line, and you think that I am going to –

The CHAIR: Deputy Chair, I have not finished. Please do not interrupt me. Mr McGowan, if you have a question to ask the minister, I suggest you ask her and you afford her and the others at the table an opportunity to answer your question. I am assuming you do seriously want an answer to your question. We will take it on record and it will form part of our report. Do you have a question that you would like to ask?

Nick McGOWAN: There has been an extra –

Vicki WARD: Mr McGowan, if you would like us to supply you with the manual that talks you through the ins and outs of the appliances that we have, I am sure that we can have a conversation with FRV, who could –

Nick McGOWAN: There is a ULP appliance, Minister, in Craigieburn that has been there for nine years. Why is it still there and not commissioned?

Vicki WARD: Nine years?

Nick McGOWAN: Nine years.

Vicki WARD: And why is it not commissioned?

Nick McGOWAN: Correct.

Vicki WARD: You mean being able to be used?

Nick McGOWAN: Correct.

Vicki WARD: Well, there may be issues with it, I suspect. Have you –

Nick McGOWAN: I am asking you the question, Minister.

Vicki WARD: Yes, I understand that.

Nick McGOWAN: Surely you would know that, being the minister. ULP – nine years.

Vicki WARD: Yes. Mr McGowan, we are here to talk about our budget and the investment that we have put in our budget, which is \$40 million –

Nick McGOWAN: I am happy to talk about your budget any day of the week.

Vicki WARD: for rolling replacement stock, which is for –

Nick McGOWAN: So far you cannot answer the basic questions.

Vicki WARD: rolling replacement stock over four years. Now, Mr McGowan –

Nick McGOWAN: Will your budget then pay for the teleboom at Ringwood?

Vicki WARD: this is in addition to the 27 new appliances that are at various stages of delivery, and this includes five pumper platforms.

Nick McGOWAN: Okay, so let us talk about delivery then.

Vicki WARD: It includes an ultralight pumper.

Nick McGOWAN: Minister, where will your 19 heavy pumpers go?

Vicki WARD: It includes two rehabilitation units and three new breathing apparatus support vehicles.

Nick McGOWAN: You are just reading. You may as well table a document.

Vicki WARD: I am sorry, Mr McGowan –

Nick McGOWAN: Do not be sorry. You are not answering the question; you are just reading off a sheet of paper.

Vicki WARD: but because you are talking over the top of me, it makes it very difficult for –

The CHAIR: Excuse me, Minister. Deputy Chair, if you have a question, could you please ask one question at a time and afford the minister the opportunity to answer your question.

Nick McGOWAN: Minister, where will the 19 heavy pumpers and the four ladder platforms be located?

Vicki WARD: Well, that is an operational decision for FRV.

Nick McGOWAN: Well, perhaps we ought to ask somebody who knows the answer. Because if the minister does not know the answer –

Vicki WARD: No, Mr McGowan, do not be rude and do not patronise me by eye roll respecting the role that FRV plays.

Nick McGOWAN: It is not about being rude or patronising. Minister, you are being duplicitous, because you can tell us for the CFA trucks –

Vicki WARD: What you are doing is being very patronising and actually quite rude.

Nick McGOWAN: It is not patronising at all. You are a minister now, Minister.

Vicki WARD: It does not really help get information, Mr McGowan. This is absolutely ridiculous.

Nick McGOWAN: You have a responsibility to be able tell us where these trucks can go. Firefighters' lives are on the line, as are those who they service, and you cannot even tell us where these appliances are going to go.

The CHAIR: Excuse me, Deputy Chair.

Nick McGOWAN: It is an absolute disgrace. You should be ashamed of yourself.

The CHAIR: Deputy Chair! Excuse me, Minister –

Vicki WARD: Mr McGowan, you are better than this. This is not good behaviour by you, and this does not reflect –

Nick McGOWAN: You can tell us where the CFA vehicles will go, but you cannot tell us where the FRV vehicles will go. I will repeat the question: where are the 19 heavy pumpers?

Vicki WARD: Mr McGowan, I cannot understand a word that you are saying. All you are trying to do is belittle me for no real purpose.

Nick McGOWAN: No, I asked the Treasurer the same question in the committee, and the Treasurer said to ask you, Minister – quote unquote, that is what the Treasurer said – because you have responsibility as the minister.

Vicki WARD: Mr McGowan, calm down.

Nick McGOWAN: I am very calm, but I am not calm on behalf of firefighters, because they want to know –

The CHAIR: Mr McGowan, ask your question.

Nick McGOWAN: I am asking a question. They want to know where the 19 heavy pumpers and the four ladder platforms will go. You have listed in detail where the CFA vehicles will go, the new ones, so why not FRV?

Vicki WARD: Because it is an operational matter for FRV.

Nick McGOWAN: They are both operational matters for different authorities.

Vicki WARD: Yes. I do not understand your point.

Nick McGOWAN: Perhaps one of your secretaries can assist you, because you ought to know, if you have ordered these vehicles and appliances, where they are going to go. Surely you have not ordered them not knowing where they are going to go, Minister.

Vicki WARD: Mr McGowan, if you would pause for breath and actually allow people to speak, you would be able to understand the fact that we have agencies who operate our emergency services.

Nick McGOWAN: Then ask the agency, if you do not know the answer. You are supposed to be running the agency.

Vicki WARD: Mr McGowan, you are continuing to talk over the top and you are really not interested in the answer. You are more interested in grandstanding and trying to make as much noise as you can, which means that nobody can understand anything that is being said.

Nick McGOWAN: Would you like to take it on notice, Minister?

Vicki WARD: I really feel sorry for the poor people at Hansard who are trying to understand the noise that has been coming from your mouth.

Nick McGOWAN: Please just answer the question, Minister. You are wasting time.

Vicki WARD: Mr McGowan, as I said to you, this is an operational decision for FRV.

Nick McGOWAN: Okay. Clearly you do not know, Minister. Last financial year –

Vicki WARD: No, Mr McGowan, that is not it. And that is absolutely disrespectful to the processes that agencies actually engage in when they determine where they put appliances and where they will build or renovate new stations.

Nick McGOWAN: You can tell us for the CFA, but you cannot tell us for the FRV. It makes no sense.

Vicki WARD: I am sorry, Mr McGowan –

Nick McGOWAN: Do not be sorry.

Vicki WARD: I cannot understand what you are saying.

Nick McGOWAN: Because you keep talking.

Vicki WARD: No, you keep talking, Mr McGowan, and you are speaking at the speed of light. I think you are making it incredibly difficult for almost anyone to hear you.

Nick McGOWAN: Minister, you can sit there and –

Vicki WARD: Mr McGowan, as I said to you at the start of this process, I have a cold and I have got blocked ears. I asked you, just as I asked Ms Benham, to slow down so that I could understand you. Ms Benham was polite and gracious enough to actually do that, and I thank her for that. But when you are speaking in this way –

Nick McGOWAN: Minister, you are now filibustering and you know it.

Vicki WARD: I am not filibustering, Mr McGowan.

Nick McGOWAN: Yes, you are. You are doing it on purpose to waste time instead of answering important questions for firefighters who put their lives on the line.

Vicki WARD: I am actually holding you accountable for your behaviour because your behaviour is not acceptable.

Nick McGOWAN: Your behaviour is not acceptable. You have come here today and you cannot tell me how much each appliance holds in terms of water.

Vicki WARD: The behaviour you are engaging in, Mr McGowan, is not acceptable. It is not acceptable.

Nick McGOWAN: It is not acceptable that you do not know the answer to the most basic question that it is possible to put.

The CHAIR: Mr McGowan –

Nick McGOWAN: You should be ashamed to be a minister. You really should.

Vicki WARD: Stop turning this into a circus, Mr McGowan.

The CHAIR: Excuse me, Mr McGowan –

Nick McGOWAN: You cannot even tell us where these appliances will go. You can tell us where the CFA vehicles will go, but you will not tell us where the FRV vehicles will go.

Vicki WARD: This is a serious process that you are turning into a circus, and you need to stop.

Nick McGOWAN: You ought to be embarrassed by your performance today.

Vicki WARD: No, Mr McGowan, you should be embarrassed.

Nick McGOWAN: There are firefighters who are watching and listening to this online, and they know that the minister has no idea what they are talking about.

Vicki WARD: This is appalling behaviour of yours.

Nick McGOWAN: It is absolutely embarrassing, Minister.

Vicki WARD: Mr McGowan, you are better than this, honestly.

Nick McGOWAN: So are you, Minister.

The CHAIR: Excuse me, Minister. Deputy Chair, that kind of behaviour is out of order, and I think you know it. We are going to go on to Mr Tak.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you, Chair. Minister, now we come back to the budget, and I refer to budget paper 3, pages 70 and 78, which invests a total of \$21 million for more CFA stations. Minister, could I get a breakdown of what is included in this package and how it will support the work of our CFA volunteers and help to make sure that Victorian communities are well protected from fire risk?

Vicki WARD: Thank you very much for your question, thank you for the interest in the CFA and thank you for asking a question at a rate and at a sound that I can hear, because it is helpful. I do have blocked ears and it is hard, so thank you for your question. As a part of this budget we are delivering \$21 million in additional funding to strengthen the CFA infrastructure and to boost emergency services capacity. Our CFA are doing incredible work, and for us to be able to invest in them and show our support and our respect for the volunteer work that they do is very important, and this forms just a part of that. These developments are not just about buildings or gear, they are about keeping people safe, building stronger communities and backing our incredible volunteers, and this is really a central part of what the CFA does. The emergency response work is really important. It is important that they are able to turn up, and they always do. But it is also the community-building that is so important, and in many communities, particularly rural and regional communities, the CFA is quite a central hub for communities. They are really important places for people.

The knowledge and the expertise that CFA volunteers have are really important to so many regional and rural people. In addition to these new builds, this investment also delivers funding to complete new station builds in Hoddles Creek, Winnindoo, Yarram, Dartmoor, Litchfield, Kinglake West and Raywood. Many of these areas have faced significant fire risk, and these investments are a direct response to the increasing frequency and intensity of fires, floods and storms. I think we can all agree on the fact that climate change is posing incredible challenges to our environment and to our communities and that we are seeing, with increased ferocity, natural disasters – storms and fires – coming across the Victorian landscape. These used to be one-in-100-year emergencies, and they are not anymore; they are just happening time and time again. It is really horrible that we have seen so many communities who have been affected. Some of them have been affected in recent years at least nine times by different natural disaster emergencies that have occurred around them, so we know that we have to continue to invest and continue to support them, which we are doing with nearly \$2 billion of investment in this year's budget for the emergency services.

We continue to invest in our emergency services, and our CFA are absolutely part of this. We want to build modern, fit-for-purpose stations, meaning faster response times, safer and more efficient operations and the ability to house and maintain critical firefighting equipment. But just as I was saying about the SES to the member previously, we need to be able to have safe places to store uniforms, we need to have engines and we need to have operational equipment away from where firefighters, volunteers and supporters are gathering. We want to be able to ensure that our fire stations are as safe as possible, and we particularly want to protect our volunteers as they go about volunteering. The new and upgraded stations create a space where people feel welcome. It is a dedicated space to train, debrief and spend time together. It includes volunteer recruitment and retention, and it is critical to growing a strong volunteer base. Ultimately, these investments recognise and reinforce the extraordinary work of CFA volunteers, making sure that they do have those facilities that they absolutely deserve. There is a longer, broad-term commitment to strengthening Victoria's emergency services, and that includes the significant investment that we have got in our CFA.

I think back to earlier this year when I was in Beaufort and we celebrated the new Beaufort CFA station and heavy tanker with that community. It is a really fantastic facility, and it really gives those people and that brigade the infrastructure they need. Ms Kathage, we have been to Plenty CFA together and seen how wonderful that new build looks. It is something that is important to me. As a candidate, it was one of the first things that I announced with the then Member for Yan Yean, and it was fantastic to be at that opening together you and I, and to see how proud those volunteers are of that new facility, how fit for purpose it is and how easy it is to get out of – notwithstanding that there was that concrete bit on the side of the pathway. But it is a great-looking station, and they are a terrific brigade. I know that you are a huge supporter of them and continue to advocate for them. When we invest in the CFA and our emergency services, we are absolutely investing in the safety of every Victorian.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you. Minister, a follow-up question: budget paper 3, page 70 and page 78, also references satellite stations at Wendouree and Hampton Park. Minister, what exactly is a satellite station, and how does it benefit the local community?

Vicki WARD: Thanks very much for your question. A satellite station is really important infrastructure that supports a main station and enables people to be able to get to fires quicker. It means that there will be appliances that are stored there and some equipment stored there, which means that you are not going backwards and forwards. But what it also does is open up opportunity for volunteers or people who live near that satellite station. It gives more opportunities to volunteer, because it means that you are able to quickly respond when an alert goes off and that you are able to jump into your appliance and head off to do what you need to do. So it is essentially a smaller, strategically located extension of a main CFA brigade. It is kind of like a hub and a spoke, where you have got the hub, which is the core brigade centre, and then you have got it going out as a spoke to the satellite. It is not a full-sized station, but it does have the gear and the vehicles that are needed to respond quickly when emergencies happen. This makes a really huge difference when minutes matter, and we know that minutes do matter when it comes to emergency services. Having these satellite stations means CFA volunteers can get to things like grassfires, house fires or car accidents faster, and it also does take pressure off nearby brigades, who have been carrying a lot of the load. With these new stations the workload can be better shared, which means more sustainable operations and a better outcome for everybody involved.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you, Minister.

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

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon. How much funding in total is the SES expected to get this year relative to last year?

Vicki WARD: The SES is expected to get a number of different funding components, if you like, within the budget. That includes \$14.5 million for the Footscray SES, as we heard about earlier, and as you saw with the presentation I gave, it also includes things like \$30 million for training and for support services, because we do need to keep on going with our training capacity. The midbudget update talks to \$30 million for a rolling fleet replacement program for our SES, which will ensure the volunteers have the appliances that they need. We have got over 150 units across the state, so being able to support them in any way we can is absolutely important. On top of the more than \$23 million since 2022 we have also provided 57 new heavy rescue trucks and seven medium rescue trucks, and we are investing \$62 million to double the VESEP grants, which we have heard about, which they will be eligible for. But there is the general funding that SES uses. It is similar to what we were talking about just before with the CFA.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. Could I get an assessment from you, Minister: how much would we expect the SES to continue to have to rely on fundraising going forward? We hear perhaps that for every two dollars raised they get one dollar from the government. Does that sound about right to you?

Vicki WARD: For example, with the VESEP grants, the methodology applies that for every two dollars of government, a dollar will go in from the local units. But it is the expectation with the Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund that there will be less need for our SES volunteers to have to go out and shake that tin. We know that while that community interaction, that talking with people and engaging with people, can be an important component of fundraising, really, people are there to help. They want to be out helping community. They want to be out putting some tarp over that roof. They want to be going to that road rescue. They want to be going to pull that tree off the road. They want to be doing sandbagging, as we have heard. They want to be able to be out there in the community helping, rather than fundraising.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. Just to go back to the FRV assets discussion we were at earlier, could I just get clarification from you: the rolling fleet replacement program – how much are we expecting that to be replacing each year, and how much is in need of replacing right now in FRV?

Vicki WARD: With the fleet replacement, what you will see is exactly what it is, which is a rolling replacement, so it means that as appliances become available – it is not like we pull one off the shelf, order it and it comes out to service. There is actually a more than two-year process that is needed to be able to put together a truck. The chassis will come out, we import the chassis, it comes in and then it goes off to be workshopped, if you like; it goes out to be manufactured where the rest of the truck is put together. This takes time, as you would imagine. It depends on the appliance as to how long that will take, so when you talk about exactly when they will be replaced, it will depend on what has been ordered, how long it takes to arrive here

and how long it takes to assemble and to put together and so on. We have got a number of appliances also at the moment that are in the process of being rolled out, of being commissioned. But I think when we look at things like EVIE, which is an amazing appliance, it is a really good example of where we have had FRV work with firefighters and work with the United Firefighters Union to design a state-of-the-art appliance. It is only the second in the country that is electrically powered, and they have worked so well together to create an appliance that is something that the state should be really proud of. So there are appliances that are coming on line and that they will continue to roll out.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Minister. Do you have an assessment of how many trucks you expect will still be past retirement age and not replaced by these funds?

Vicki WARD: It depends on your definition of retirement age. I know that there is an application of 15 years that is applied to appliances, but really it is not just that idea of 'You have hit your mid-teens so you are redundant' – you have got to look at all of the ins and outs of an appliance. How often has it been used? What is the kilometre mileage on it? What kind of condition is it in as to whether or not it actually needs to be replaced, because some areas are less active than others or different appliances have play different roles and are required for different fires. You may see an appliance that does not go out as often as others do because it has got a different application and it fights different types of fires.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. I mean, just a further assessment from you, though: for some of these assets, how old is too old?

Vicki WARD: It is really a decision for FRV to work through with their workforce. It is not a decision for me.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: I note that, but what are you hearing from FRV in that regard?

Vicki WARD: We know that for FRV they have hit their benchmark in terms of having over 85 per cent of their appliances be operational and not be offline. We see that they are maintaining. They have got an excellent maintenance crew who go out even onto the fireground; they will go out to the unit itself, to the brigade itself, or they will come into the mechanics shops such as the one at Thornbury to repair the trucks as they are needed to be repaired. I know FRV is appreciative of having a rolling replacement fleet and that this \$40 million is welcome, because it will continue and it does give some line of sight and some absolute certainty around ordering what needs to be ordered and to be able to do a bit of forward planning.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. I am probably nearly out of time but just back to SES, has SES suggested that the amount of funding they are expecting for this year will fill existing gaps?

Vicki WARD: SES has not had any commentary to me about any concerns or challenges that they have in the budget.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. What instead have they conveyed to you?

Vicki WARD: I have only just had informal – I have not had a formal meeting with the SES where we have spoken about the budget, but I have heard from SES volunteers that I have been in contact with that they are looking forward to the doubling, the more than doubling, of the VESEP grant. They are looking forward to the new build that is going into Footscray. They are looking forward to the investment that is going to be in their services.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. Thank you, Mr Puglielli. Mr Galea.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon, Minister and officials. Minister, we have discussed a lot of different agencies today. I would like to ask you about Triple Zero Victoria, obviously one of our really critical agencies that are always there for Victorians when we need them the most; they do incredible work. I would like to ask you specifically about a line item.

Nick McGowan interjected.

Michael GALEA: Well, I think it is important anyway, Mr McGowan, but they do important work. You have an output initiative this year, 'Backing Triple Zero Victoria to meet demand'. Now, obviously as a

minister it is not your job to be going into TZV every other week and writing their roster for them, but it is your role to be ensuring that they have the support that they need, and I would imagine this initiative is a very big part of that. Could you talk to me about the sort of things that this initiative will deliver to ensure that they can continue to support Victorians when they need them?

Vicki WARD: Yes, absolutely. Despite the fact that it feels that we are at a football match where we have people commenting from the peanut gallery all the way through, I will endeavour to respond to your question as succinctly as possible given the fact that we have got only a few minutes left. Thanks very much for your question. I really do want to acknowledge the phenomenal work that our 000 call takers and dispatchers do every single day. I have been to Tally Ho and Mount Helen, and it is incredible: the skill set that they have that they display is really quite extraordinary, and how you can sit down at a station and absolutely look at all the different screens, all the different moving parts, keep everything together as you are either taking a call or if you are working through dispatch and as you are working out where all the moving parts are and how to get the quickest vehicle to that person that they may need depending on the emergency that they have got is really extraordinary, and they really do deserve our gratitude and our respect. I would hope that that is something that is held by every person on your committee as well.

Mr Galea, there is absolutely no overstating the critical role that this workforce plays. They are really the glue that connects all of our emergency services together. It does not function without this highly skilled workforce. They are the critical link between the Victorian community and Victoria's emergency services organisations, and that includes Ambulance Victoria, Victoria Police, Fire Rescue Victoria, Country Fire Authority and the Victorian State Emergency Service. So they work closely with these partners, in particular frontline emergency workers, to respond to sensitive, time-critical and life-dependent emergencies. The call takers, who are really called emergency communications officers, or ECOs, are on the phone with callers when emergency help is needed most. I think to be able to have that incredible manner when you are talking to somebody who is possibly having the worst day of their life – that you have got people who are able to do this time and time again every day is really quite extraordinary.

In 2023–24 TZV answered 2.9 million calls for assistance, representing a call every 10.9 seconds or nearly 8000 calls a day. That is a really extraordinary workload. As our population rises and climate change leads to more frequent emergency events it is crucial to invest now in additional workforce for TZV, and this is why we have invested in an additional 50 staff for TZV. And it is not just the staff that we are investing in, it is the training that goes with it, and it is really quite complex training. It is months and months of training before you can actually get on the phone, and it is years before you get to do a dispatch. It is really highly skilled work.

In the budget we have invested \$24.7 million to ensure Victorians can always get the help they need during an emergency by hiring 50 additional staff over two years, and that ensures that there will be more call takers and dispatchers for TZV to provide additional support during periods of high demand, making sure, whether it is on a Tuesday morning, a Tuesday evening, as we are tonight, or late on a Saturday night or in a heatwave, Victorians can have help on the other end of the line. It builds on the substantial additional investment that we have made over recent years in Triple Zero, totalling more than half a billion dollars for a next-generation call-taking dispatch system and additional call takers and dispatchers.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Minister. I appreciate the overview of the staff recruitment process and that work as well, because it is also of course very important to ensure that that work can be sustained. If I can turn to the CAD system, we know that in budget paper 4, page 71, it discusses the next-generation CAD system, which will help TZV to continue these services at the highest possible standard into the future. I wonder if you can please give the committee an update on where this program is at in relation to the procurement of a new CAD system.

Vicki WARD: Yes. The CAD system – there is significant work that has been done, supported by more than \$300 million in investment to develop and implement the next-generation CAD system for Triple Zero, and this budget continues that really important work. We want to make sure that we have got a CAD system that is modern – and it does take years to build, it does take time and it does take expertise. The system really underpins our Triple Zero system, and it supports all the incoming calls for assistance. It enables the dispatch of resources, and it is also the data source for TZV to record and share emergency incident information. It really will provide for more reliability and increased security, and it will have greater functionality and be designed to improve outcomes for the community and emergency services organisations.

It is a complex system. As I was talking about, there are so many different moving parts. You have got people from all over the state who are calling in, but you have also got different agencies that you have got to coordinate with in order to ensure that you have got the quickest response possible. Due to the complexity of the system and after extensive market engagement TZV have partnered with three key vendors to deliver the next-generation CAD system, which is Capgemini –

Kate FITZGERALD: Capgemini.

Vicki WARD: Capgemini – thank you. Capgemini, the strategic delivery partner, Fujitsu, the system integrator, and Hexagon, the software vendor. Over the next year Triple Zero will continue with the implementation of the project, with some of the key areas of focus being developing and thoroughly testing the next-generation CAD system. Whether it is call taking, dispatching or data sharing, every aspect will go towards rigorous testing during the development and build stage and will also enhance the TZV network and its core infrastructure. This system is being designed to improve integration with TZV's emergency services organisation partners, and a lot of the work will be about building system integration between TZV and the other emergency services organisations such as Ambulance Victoria and Fire Rescue Victoria.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. Thank you, Mr Galea. Minister and officials, thank you very much for taking the time to appear before the committee today. The committee is going to follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing, and responses will be required within five working days of the committee's request.

The committee is now going to take a break before beginning its consideration of the portfolio of equality at 6:15 pm.

I declare this hearing adjourned.

Witnesses withdrew.