

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2025-26 Budget Estimates

Melbourne – Thursday 5 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

Gabrielle Williams MP, Minister for Public and Active Transport;

Jeroen Weimar, Secretary,

Fiona Adamson, Head, Transport Services,

Will Tieppo, Deputy Secretary, Network Design and Integration,

Stuart Johns, Executive Director, Modal Planning,

Tammy O'Connor, Chief Executive Officer, Safe Transport Victoria, and

Ben Phyland, Executive Director, Rolling Stock and Ticketing, Department of Transport and Planning; and

Warwick Horsley, Acting Chief Executive Officer, V/Line.

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

I ask that mobile telephones now 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 you make outside of these hearings 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. The broadcast includes automated captioning. Members and witnesses should be aware that all microphones are live during hearings and anything said may be picked up and captioned, even if you say it 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 will be placed on the committee's website.

I welcome the Minister for Public and Active Transport the Honourable Gabrielle Williams as well as officials from DTP. Minister, I am going to invite you to make an opening statement or presentation of no more than 10 minutes, after which time committee members will ask you questions. Your time starts now.

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: Thank you, Chair. Again I will begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we are currently gathered, the Wurundjeri people, and pay my respects to their elders past and present and any other First Nations people who may be either with us in the room today or watching online.

Visual presentation.

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: I will get straight into the presentation, if I can. The Allan government is focused, as many in this room know, on what matters most: reducing the cost of public transport for families, getting Victorians home safer and sooner and delivering more services, which have been enabled – unlocked, if you like – by our Big Build agenda. I am pleased to appear before the committee today to talk about our continued investments in building and operationalising these critical projects. As I mentioned in the last hearing, this is a particularly important year, with the Metro Tunnel and the West Gate Tunnel projects coming online, and this is a budget focused on starting to deliver the benefits of these projects while continuing also to deliver future upgrades. This year's budget invests \$8.5 billion to deliver more services to respond to growth, to continue to modernise and improve the safety and accessibility of our network and to deliver real cost-of-living relief for families.

I will just go to the next slide. The \$8.5 billion investment includes \$318 million over four years to provide free public transport to every Victorian child anywhere in the state – that is for kids under 18 years of age – and also funding to expand free travel for seniors on weekends to anywhere in the state. It also includes funding, some of which was canvassed in the last session, over five years to switch on turn-up-and-go Metro Tunnel services and also to finalise wayfinding and customer information and to provide additional network and customer support for that initial period of passenger services, as I previously discussed. It has got \$98 million over four years to run more frequent train services across the metro network, including on the Werribee, Sandringham, Craigieburn and Upfield lines and some regional networks as well, including the Gippsland and Seymour lines. There is \$162 million over four years to expand Victoria's bus network, particularly in the growth areas of Melbourne's west. There is \$270 million over three years to deliver a more reliable rail network for regional Victorians. There is \$98 million over three years for safety upgrades and infrastructure to enable the next generation of trams and \$14 million over two years to deliver additional critical active transport connections and some tactiles and CCTV at train stations to improve safety and accessibility.

Next slide, please. The budget will make public transport, as I have outlined, free for kids under 18 anywhere in Victoria. That will commence from 1 January next year, and hundreds of thousands of families will save about \$755 a year per child. That is based on the cost of a yearly student pass. It is a massive investment to put money back into household budgets. More than 1 million young Victorians and their families stand to benefit from this initiative. It is also, though, about changing cultures, ensuring younger generations are fluent in public transport use and more likely to continue that into adulthood. The new youth Myki will be able to be used like any other Myki card to tap on and travel through the ticket gates at stations and on a bus or tram, with arrangements made for non-Myki areas and regional town buses as well.

I am pleased to announce today that we will be giving kids across the state the chance to design that new youth Myki card, which is a lot of fun. From tomorrow until 15 June kids between the ages of I think five and 17 will be able to submit their hand-drawn or digital design on the engage.vic website for a chance to showcase their work on the new youth Myki card and of course, while they are at it, if they win, win a gift card for their efforts. So I am really looking forward to seeing the creativity of our youth.

As I outlined earlier, the budget also extends free public transport for seniors to anywhere in the state. It is also from 1 January next year. That will impact about 650,000 seniors who use public transport, meaning they can catch a train, tram or bus for free on the weekends anywhere across our network, saving seniors who travel more than about \$360 a year on average. Passengers with a seniors Myki will also need to carry their seniors card while travelling and use their seniors Myki to touch on and touch off as usual, but Myki cards will not be charged. Seniors card holders will also continue to be eligible, of course, for that 50 per cent discount of the full fare on weekdays.

Next slide, please. The Metro Tunnel is the biggest transformation of our rail network in over 40 years. It is an investment, and the investment in this year's budget of \$727 million will operationalise the tunnel. It will switch it on and deliver turn-up-and-go services for the Sunbury, Cranbourne and Pakenham lines that run through it. Unlike networks in Sydney or indeed in London and their projects, so Sydney Metro or indeed the Elizabeth line, our Metro Tunnel project is a bit unique because ours is integrated with our broader train network in a way that those others are not, which arguably makes it a much more complex project. So effectively what it means is that our timetabling process is a very, very complex one, because we effectively have to retimetable the entire network, not even just the entire train network but the buses and trams along with it, to make sure that they are interfacing with the train network, as they should. It is a very big and complex task.

Next slide. We have already delivered since we came to office 2200 additional weekly train services across our rail network. That is kind of depicted in that slide there. It is a little bit busy – apologies for that – but it sort of tells you where all the uplift is. I know what you are about to say, Ms Benham.

Jade Benham interjected.

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: This budget builds on this government's commitment to continue to deliver more rail services, with a big boost to metro and regional train services. We will be giving the Werribee line two additional trains per hour in the morning and afternoon peaks, which will increase the number of trains from six to eight per hour. On the Sandringham line we will increase the number of trains from four to six per hour

between peak periods on weekdays so that services effectively run every 10 minutes. On the Craigieburn line we will increase services during shoulder peak and off-peak periods, with trains running at least every 20 minutes, including late at night and on weekends. On the Upfield line we will increase off-peak services, with trains running at least every 20 minutes, including late at night and on weekends. On the Traralgon line we will add extra weekday interpeak services. Following the completion of the Gippsland line upgrade this year, trains will be set to run every 40 minutes. On the Bendigo line we will have longer trains running on more weekend services, so adding extra capacity. And on the Seymour line there is an additional service in the morning and afternoon peaks as well.

In terms of our next slide, going to our regions, we know that more passengers are taking advantage of our fairer fares – that is, our regional fare cap across the regional rail network. Our regional rail revival program has enabled us to run more frequent and reliable services to help meet that growing demand. On the Gippsland line and Shepparton line we are in the midst of a construction blitz that will deliver new signalling systems so trains can run more often and more reliably on those lines too. Since the introduction of our regional fare cap, we have added almost 150 of a promised 200 committed additional weekend services to respond to periods of especially high demand on weekends so that we can continue to deliver those services that we know Victorians are craving, as demonstrated by the uptick in travel since we introduced that policy. We have also invested in improved train maintenance and consistently invested in our regional operator to operate and maintain assets and modernise their operations as well, and this budget continues this investment with further funding for V/Line operations.

We will move to the next slide, on buses. We understand the importance of buses to local communities, especially in our growing suburbs; they are the great connectors, including connecting Victorians to heavy rail and to other modes of travel, which is very important. Since 2014 we have given Victorians more than 22,000 extra bus services per week and invested more than \$890 million in improving our bus network, including \$162 million in this budget. This year's budget investment delivers additional services for growth areas and new estates. It aligns bus services with new infrastructure, extends the hours of operations of bus services to reflect travel patterns and provides connections to the rail corridor, including the turn-up-and-go services that will come on line on the Metro Tunnel corridor.

Melbourne's west gets seven new or upgraded bus services, in Tarneit, Tarneit West, Rockbank, Aintree, Deanside, Cairnlea, Thornhill Park, Cobblebank and Mount Atkinson. In Werribee, Kings Leigh estate will be connected to the bus network for the first time, and services will increase to the new Wyndham law courts and employment precincts as well. In the north, Wollert and Beveridge will get new and improved services. In the south-east, the community will get a new cross-peninsula bus service directly connecting Hastings and Mornington via Tyabb Road. These services provide important connections and more choice and, importantly, reduce car reliance and congestion our roads. We know how important that is.

Just shortly, I might run out, but we have got new trams coming onto the network. They are more accessible. They are lovely. They will start testing later this year.

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

Nick McGOWAN: Minister, we are just starting to get to know each other, but I have bad news for you.

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: It has been a pleasure.

Nick McGOWAN: It has been a pleasure, but it could turn sour because I am probably going to have to report you to the RSPCA.

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: Oh?

Nick McGOWAN: I know, it is serious. I have got something called *Turtle Guardian*.

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: Oh, right. This would be Ringwood East station.

Nick McGOWAN: Minister, I am all for animal spirits, but this one takes the next level. This turtle has no head and no legs, and you and your department have placed it at Ringwood East train station, where it sits sadly, I must say, although you cannot tell from the expression its face because it does not have a face.

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: Yes.

Nick McGOWAN: But nonetheless, the shell sits there. Reportedly it is valued at between \$50,000 to half a million dollars. I hope it is not the latter, but one does not quite know. I have pondered that perhaps it is an open urinal, like they have in Amsterdam, but I hope that is not what it is either. And all of this is obviously –

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: Sorry, say that again.

Nick McGOWAN: I hope it is not an open urinal.

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: No, no, the bit before that. What were you likening to an open urinal?

Nick McGOWAN: A urinal. That is what it looks like.

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: No, no, what were you likening it to – the artwork?

Nick McGOWAN: The sculpture, yes.

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: Okay. All right.

Nick McGOWAN: It is called a sculpture. It is called *Turtle Guardian*, according to your letter to me, which I did appreciate. What I really want – and you know – for the people of Ringwood East and for the mums and dads and all these kids who are now going to use the transport system, because we do not want to tell them to hold on all the way from Ringwood into the city, is a single public toilet. And as you and I both know, because I have filmed this, the toilet at the rear of the IGA, no pun intended, is a great distance away and very dark – not safe for women, not safe for people with a disability. So for the love of God, for the love of whatever God you have or want, can you please redefine this station as a premium station, because although it is not staffed, it does have a staff toilet. I am happy to change that sign to say ‘public toilet’ – I will pay for that expense. That is my ask.

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: Thank you, Mr McGowan. I did anticipate that you might ask about this matter, and I think the best place to start is actually what determines the policy about which stations have accessible toilets and which ones do not. I know that this is something that we have communicated and corresponded about previously. Effectively, toilets are only provided at train stations where railway employees are onsite, so staffed stations. That is a policy decision that is over three decades old, I understand, so it has been a longstanding practice across our network, the reason being that it is ultimately about safety, really. It is about ensuring that there is assistance available to support passengers who are accessing those facilities should they need them, and you can see that in those sorts of environments you might get slips, trips, falls. You have also got a presence that deters antisocial behaviour and ensures greater levels of community safety. It is also about deterring things like vandalism and damage to public property. I think that that probably spells out well why that policy has existed.

I could talk to you about how staffing levels at train stations are determined too as a way of explaining why East Ringwood has not been categorised the way that you would like it to be. There are effectively three types of station categories, if you like. There are local, host and premium, and that is according to a mix of considerations that include patronage and also local, operational and user considerations. Metro Trains Melbourne, as the train system operator, is obligated to provide staffing levels according to those station classifications. So a host station has to have at least one station member to provide customer services every weekday –

Nick McGOWAN: Minister, I might interrupt you there. I love the explanation, but as you have said, we have corresponded about these excuses. That is what they are, because as you and I both know, a station does have CCTV cameras and a station has infinitely more security than the toilets at the back of the IGA. It also has PSOs who are there every night of the week, which means it is an infinitely safer alternative for women, children, people with disabilities and our senior citizens than what they currently have, which is a toilet block at the back of an IGA in some dark laneway, which I would not recommend anyone go to any time of the day or particularly night. I will move on, because I think we need to continue. I just do not think it passes any pub test in Victoria in the year 2025.

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: I think to say it is a long way away might be an overstretch. It is a 3-minute walk away.

Nick McGOWAN: I will invite you to come and walk with me. It is a long way for any citizen. But certainly for a female at night-time I would not suggest it. I despair that in the year 2025 we are building any new train stations, frankly, that do not have at least one public toilet that is a disability access toilet that everyone can use. I have made my point. I will move on.

I will ask you separately: there is a bus that services Norwood Secondary College, bus 2641. It is routinely overcrowded. I have written to the education minister before. I have written to your predecessors before. The principals themselves stand as the children get on this bus. There are not enough seats. They want an elongated bus – a longer bus, that is, rather than a shorter bus. We have repeatedly asked for this. The last response from the government was that children can use alternate buses 364 or 380. The reality is this bus has a certain route that it follows and of course the children need to use that route to get home. So it is a serious safety concern. The principals themselves stand there and count the children, and time and again they tell me it is over the prescribed number of children. Yet I cannot get traction with the government to change it to a longer concertina bus versus the shorter bus. I do not know what I need to do to get it changed before we have a serious accident for Norwood Secondary College.

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: Thank you for the question. I might seek clarification from our resident bus expert on whether this is a school bus program bus or indeed a special, because they are governed by different departments, if that makes sense. One is provided through the Department of Education, but you also did reference some public routes as well as potential alternatives. Stuart, you may have –

Stuart JOHNS: We will need to take it on notice, Minister.

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: Okay. We can take that particular one on notice. What I can say as a broader question point in terms of bus planning, though, is, one, we monitor our patronage levels as an ongoing job, if you like, across our public transport networks, and that obviously determines our network planning for those routes. You have obviously corresponded with the department to learn of where there are alternative routes. I asked a very specific question of Stuart around what program it falls within because they have slightly different purposes.

Nick McGOWAN: I appreciate that.

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: A Department of Education one would be a dedicated school bus, if you like, whereas the Department of Transport and Planning school bus specials are effectively public bus services that also happen to service public school bus routes. Jeroen, you look like you are keen to jump in on how we plan those.

Nick McGOWAN: I appreciate that; can I just add on to that, Minister – Jeroen, I will come to you, Secretary, and I thank you for your interest. I just need to keep moving at the same time, because I know you will come back to me on those.

Can someone please check that the disability toilet that is at Ringwood station is compliant? It strikes me that it is noncompliant from the entry point that is the door to the toilet itself. I would like to think it is on some sort of schedule for upgrade, but it is currently, as I understand it, noncompliant, so for people with a disability who use a wheelchair – and I have got a lot of constituents, young children included – it is very difficult for them to use. Likewise, the tactile ground service indicators on Blackburn station have worn off significantly. It would be good for me to know whether they are part of this budget and whether they will be fixed as soon as possible, obviously for people who are low or no vision.

Jeroen WEIMAR: Mr McGowan, very briefly, I was at Ringwood station a month ago. I am happy to follow up on the –

Nick McGOWAN: Oh, you should have called me.

Jeroen WEIMAR: I will do next time. And also there is a rolling program of tactile indicators and updates of those across the network.

Nick McGOWAN: Okay.

The CHAIR: Thank you. We are going to go to Ms Kathage – sorry, Mr Hilakari.

Mathew HILAKARI: I might steal Ms Kathage's thunder, if that is okay. Thank you, Minister. Thank you, officials, for your attendance this afternoon. Minister, I feel like you are going to be able to predict my questions usually because of my engagement with you on these matters previously. I of course refer to page 83 of BP3 around free public transport for kids, something that I think is really the stand-out in this budget. It is an amazing program. I am just hoping you can explain a little bit of the impact that this will have on cost of living, but more broadly for families and particularly our young people. We had some students in from Homestead college in Point Cook yesterday, and as I said to them, how governments choose to spend their money talks to their values. I would love to hear more about it and why it is so valuable.

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: Absolutely. I think that is a lovely frame, because this particular policy offering and budget decision is one that is very close to my heart, and I know it, like many great success stories, has many, many parents. It has been a number of us that have worked on this over many, many years. But that is for good reason, because we know the impact it can have and will have on household budgets but also on creating that sort of culture of public transport use that we want for young people.

I think the best starting point in answering your question is that many families are struggling at the moment. We have seen significant cost pressures play out across all of our communities, whether it be from rising interest rates and therefore the cost of mortgages, whether it be increasing grocery bills, childcare costs, all those things that really start to weigh on families and lead to them making often quite difficult decisions about what they are going to spend money on and what they are going to cut back. Every opportunity we get to put money back into household budgets I think is very important, because it helps maintain a good standard of living while we are there.

This budget, as you have outlined, delivers on a commitment to deliver free public transport from 1 January next year for kids under the age of 18. That, as I outlined in my opening remarks, will deliver a saving of approximately \$755 a year per child, and that is based on the cost of a student pass. For a family with three children, for example, that would be somewhere in the order of \$2265 a year, but for many families it may actually end up being more than that, because a student without a yearly pass who just buys a daily fare a few times a week – four times a week, say, and we know many do – they would be spending about \$1144 a year, so it is quite an increase in cost and therefore quite an increase in saving as a consequence of this policy.

Allowing those kids to now access the public transport network for free opens up opportunities. It is about making sure that we are removing barriers that might otherwise prevent them from getting to school, getting to a part-time job, getting to their local sporting commitments, footy training, whatever it might be, and also getting to engage socially in a way that they might not either. We also know it frees up time for parents. If this gets kids using public transport and frees up mum or dad to not be having to be the family taxi as much – we all know it is going to be there for a while – then that again is not just a money saving, it is a time saving. It frees up families to operate a bit differently and also savings to spend on something else that might be needed. I have outlined in my opening remarks that we are going to deliver this through a youth Myki card, which, excitingly, is out for design consultation with our littlest Victorians.

Nick McGOWAN: Is it a cost-saving measure, Minister?

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: A cost-saving measure, what?

Nick McGOWAN: The design fees.

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: The design fees? Well, you know, if it talks to our economic prudence, I am very happy to claim it.

Nick McGOWAN: Can I do a design or is it just children?

Mathew HILAKARI: I thought you would be too embarrassed to ask, Mr McGowan.

Nick McGOWAN: I will draw a picture of us, Minister.

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: Mr McGowan, you are a very youthful looking man. I am not sure that I would put you quite in the five to 17 category. You have had an impressive career if you are 14 years old. But you should feel free to urge all the little people and younger people in your life to participate in that competition, because I think it is going to generate some great outcomes and some probably quite interesting design options if previous experience at going out to the public for ideas is anything to go by. But it is a genuinely exciting opportunity. Having that youth Myki card is a golden ticket, really, for young people to be able to take up opportunities that they may not have had before, and we have been able to do it because we are enhancing our whole public transport network through the addition of more services and infrastructure that enables more services in a way that now means that we can offer those services and offer the opportunities that come with them to more people.

Mathew HILAKARI: And I think it really adds the opportunity for the richness of young people to have a great social and engaged life across our community. I think it really dovetails well with the free weekend PT for seniors. I am just hoping you could talk a little bit through what that expansion of that program is like, because we had some existing free PT for seniors already and this is now a total package, so to speak.

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: Yes, that is right. This is a pretty significant expansion and should also be seen in conjunction with, I guess, the free PT for kids, because it is also freeing up grandparents to be able to take the kids away for a weekend somewhere. As the mother of a young child, I am all for that, for grandparents taking up some long periods of special time –

Mathew HILAKARI: I do not think Hansard is going to capture truly the emphasis you had there.

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: with young children, and I see Ms Benham nodding her head in some level of acknowledgement of what it might mean to have grandparents spend some more quality time with grandkids on weekends at a distance.

But the starting point, really, in answering your question here is also about cost of living, about acknowledging that many seniors across our state are also struggling and that this represents yet another savings measure we can deliver to our older Victorians to also make our state more accessible to them. We know our public transport travel is great. When you look at what has happened on the back of our, say, regional fare cap and what people have done to take that up and get out there and take it as an opportunity to explore our state, for those who might be retired, who might have that bit of extra time and want to get out there and do some exploring of our state, this is a great way to do it on weekends, whether it be with family or not. But it is a very significant uplift.

You alluded to the fact that this is an expansion. Currently, Victorian seniors enjoy free weekend travel on public transport in any two consecutive zones and are otherwise eligible for the 50 per cent full-fare weekday discount. So this change really is extending the benefits for seniors quite significantly because it means that they will be able to travel anywhere in Victoria, not just through those two consecutive zones.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. We will go to Mr Welch.

Richard WELCH: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister. Minister, just in regard to the free transport for children, the children will still need a card?

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: Yes.

Richard WELCH: And we will be printing a million of those cards?

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: Well, they will be printed as they are required as a part of that. They come at a fee of \$5 just for the card. So the services are free, and the card, though, will have a nominal payment to cover the cost of making the card but also to attribute a value to it. That is important because we want kids to value this card, to make sure that it is something that is being protected in their wallet or in their pocket as their golden ticket to our public transport network.

Richard WELCH: So what is the cost of printing a million bespoke cards?

Nick McGOWAN: Charging people \$5 million.

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: That is covered within the cost that we are charging for the card.

Richard WELCH: So it would be roughly \$5 million.

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: The cost of buying the card fully covers the cost of the printing of those cards, so in that sense it is a cost recovery proposition in terms of the cards.

Richard WELCH: And according to your press release, you are printing a million of them.

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: Well, we are saying a million children would be eligible to travel under one. So that is the estimate of how many kids would fall under 18 and who would be able to be avail themselves of the free Myki.

Richard WELCH: Five million dollars. Okay. Thank you. Over the last 20 years \$3.5 billion has been spent on Melbourne's public transport ticketing system, from development to design to implementation. A billion also of this is the government's upgrade to contactless. Just three months ago you said the contactless payments would commence from January next year. Why has it been delayed again?

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: It has not. That timeframe stands. The commencement of the rollout will start from early next year, and that will start on our train network and then gradually roll out to the remainder of the network from there. So we are already in the process of seeing the readers appearing, the replacement of the readers on the network.

Richard WELCH: You are saying there has been no change to the schedule?

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: That is right. The timeframes that were announced a few months ago are the most up-to-date timeframes for delivery, and we are already seeing that work start now. We are seeing the new readers starting to roll out across the network now.

Richard WELCH: What was the original date it was going to go live? I thought it was much earlier than that.

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: Secretary?

Jeroen WEIMAR: Thank you, Mr Welch. When the contract with Conduent was originally signed the rollout for open loop payment was 2026, and we remain on track for opening that up. As the minister said, we have got 42 of the new devices already out there operating on the existing Myki system. So the way we are approaching this is that the existing Myki system will continue to operate. We are replacing the readers at this moment in time. We have got 42 of them out there already, with another 59 separate ones. We have had a quarter of a million tap-ons already on those new readers. Those readers are working well. We will roll those out this year, and then next year the open loop system will start at the back office, so you will be able to use a credit card payment from next year as well as the existing Myki, which will run in parallel.

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: What we also publicly committed to at the time was to commence trials of the technology by last year, which we did. We started the Wangaratta bus trial last year, and then we have been, as the Secretary has just spoken to –

Richard WELCH: So it will be working for the whole network next year?

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: It starts to roll out, starting from trains, and then it gradually rolls out across the rest of the network from there.

Richard WELCH: When will the whole network –

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: Well, part of that will be informed by ensuring that the technology is functioning as we expect it will across the network, and then we will be able to then give updates about when it starts to go on our tram and bus services.

Richard WELCH: So it will not be the whole network next year?

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: It will commence from next year. That is what we are saying. It is over time.

Richard WELCH: If you could just clarify, it will not be the whole network next year?

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: We will give updates. I am not announcing the full timeframe of the network.

Richard WELCH: But you must have a plan.

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: But I am saying it will start from rail next year and then we will see a commencement, a rolling out of it across the remainder of the public transport network from there.

Richard WELCH: Your current project plan for the rollout, you are saying that may end next year.

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: I am saying that how we roll it out from that point of train throughout the network we will be informing the community about as we do that. But we are starting with the train network, and then we will be moving to trams and buses over a period of time.

Richard WELCH: I sense a bit of confusion here.

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: No, no. That is –

Richard WELCH: Is it going to be on the full network?

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: No. It starts on trains from next year, with rollout from that time, and then we will be moving to trams and buses.

Richard WELCH: When will it do the whole network?

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: That will be dependent somewhat on what we learn from this phase of the rollout.

Richard WELCH: But you are saying that could be next year.

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: I am saying it starts from next year. I am saying it starts on our rail network next year, and then we will move to I believe it is trams first. Secretary, is that right?

Richard WELCH: You would obviously have a project plan. When does the plan have the full system?

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: Sorry – bus next and then tram.

Richard WELCH: A very simple question. I will simplify the whole thing down.

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: Yes.

Richard WELCH: In your project plan, which will have a start, a middle and an end, when does the whole system become operational? What date?

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: I am not putting a date on that as such. We have given the plan for how we will roll this out across the network, keeping in mind, Mr Welch, that if you look at commensurate projects interstate – let us look at Sydney; everyone is very eager to say Sydney has got this technology. Sydney has this technology only in some areas and only on adult full-fare fares and it is currently out to market to get the same sort of technology that we are building here right now that gives us more options to be across more ticket structures as well. It took them about three and a half years; we are starting our rollout within a little over two. If you look at Queensland, they are four years into their rollout and they are still going. We are two years in.

Richard WELCH: So next year you will –

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: But from the time we start rolling out – we are actually moving at a pretty decent pace as compared to our interstate counterparts, to roll out this technology.

Richard WELCH: Well, it depends where you start that clock from, really, doesn't it?

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: Well, you can only start the clock from the time that the operator took over the contract and started to build.

Richard WELCH: 2024. So is it the case then that next year some people will need two tickets?

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: No.

Richard WELCH: Two kinds depending on where they are.

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: What do you mean by that?

Richard WELCH: You start somewhere where you can tap on, but somewhere else you would not be able to tap off with the phone.

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: Across modes? Is that what you are getting at – across modes? Just to clarify for the –

Richard WELCH: If it is only partially rolled out next year, will there be parts of the route where you can tap on with your phone but you cannot tap off?

Jeroen WEIMAR: We are working on what the phasing of the rollout will be next year. There are a number of options open to us at this point in time. What I can be very clear on at this point is that all the readers are being deployed now on the rail network, the readers will be deployed on the tram and bus network over the course of the rest of this year, and the back-end system to enable open-loop payment is being developed now and will start to be deployed on the rail network from next year. We will then work through a customer-facing campaign that says exactly how we will phase that ticketing system in. That is exactly the way that other cities have had to do this. This is a complex piece, because you are moving from an extant ticketing system to a new platform. What has been very clear about the approach we have taken is that we are retaining the existing Myki system throughout.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

Richard WELCH: Thank you, Minister.

The CHAIR: We are going to go to Ms Kathage.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you, Chair, Minister and officials. I am referring to budget paper 3, page 83, and the \$98.7 million there for ‘More trains, more often’, which is fantastic, to have additional services on the Seymour line. It is a massive win for the community, Minister. We are very, very happy. So what are your reflections on the importance of this?

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: Look, I take any opportunity to talk about why it is important that we deliver more trains, more often. The package that you have referred to in the budget papers – that budget paper reference you have referred to covers a number of initiatives that are aiming to deliver services where they are most needed on the network, and that includes of course the Seymour line and other regional and metropolitan lines in Victoria’s growth corridor. We want all Victorians to be able to rely on our public transport network and to ultimately choose to travel by train and to choose, hopefully, to leave the car at home. We know that is better for the environment, it is better for congestion on our roads, and it is an opportunity, particularly with high fuel prices, to save families and households some money as well.

Since we introduced the regional fare cap – that was in March 2023 – Victorians have collectively saved more than \$130 million on regional public transport. That is pretty phenomenal. That is about 51 million train and coach trips taken on our V/Line network. We have seen, as a consequence of that, every single V/Line corridor seeing quite significant patronage growth compared to the year prior. With the increased popularity of those services, it also obviously means that we need to adapt our network to make sure that we can meet that growth in demand, which of course means adding services. The Seymour line includes Donnybrook and Wallan stations, which will be very well known to you, within that growth area, which has seen really significant increases in patronage during the peak since the introduction in particular of that regional fare cap. We are adding an additional am and pm peak service every weekday to ensure that passengers on the Seymour line are able to get to where they need to go. We know from talking to the community and from our local representatives like you, Ms Kathage, that this is a huge boost for people wanting to get to work and wanting to get to school – to get to their different life commitments that they have or to access services in the city if they need them, or in Essendon or Broadmeadows – as well as regional stations on the line during those peak

periods. I like to think of this package as – because it is – a sort of stage 1 of the uplifts that we are able to deliver as a consequence of the Metro Tunnel coming on line. It is the start of something big and beautiful, and we look forward to being able to, because of the infrastructure agenda that we have, continue to roll out service uplifts like this, which mean a lot to local communities and effectively serve to improve connection points for communities.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you. We will take that as a down payment. You mentioned at the start that it is not just Seymour; there are other regional lines. Can you talk us through why the emphasis, why the focus, on regional lines and regional passengers?

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: Sure. We know that regional Victoria's growth is not just limited to that northern corridor. Following on from our investment in the regional rail revival program – that is \$4 billion of investment which has upgraded every regional passenger line in our network – we have been able to utilise that new infrastructure to deliver additional services across the network. We have added so far more than 900 weekly V/Line services since 2014. Later this year we will be completing the Gippsland line upgrade, with the current works delivering a new signalling system, with work being particularly busy on that during this winter occupation period. This budget includes funding to deliver, on the back of that work, services every 40 minutes along the Traralgon line, which will be, as I have outlined, made possible by virtue of the Gippsland line upgrade that is in delivery at the moment. This adds to the extra services that we have delivered on weekends, running every 40 minutes between 8 am and 9 pm. We have progressively funded service improvements also on the Bendigo line, and that follows on from the Bendigo and Echuca line upgrade that was completed a couple of years ago now in 2023. We have already delivered an additional weekday am peak service from Castlemaine to Bendigo – I know that my colleagues will pick me up on that. I think that was a big misstep in my pronunciation; you can tell I am not local. That was delivered in November last year, and there are five new weekend services on the Bendigo line that were delivered in April this year. We have just provided more funding to allow us to increase the number of six-car VLocity train sets on the Bendigo line in this budget as well, which increases the capacity of that line and effectively means we can move more passengers to and from the regions on weekends.

These services build on the government's record investment in regional services. We want to encourage people to access our regions and all they have to offer. That is both in terms of tourism but also around helping people in the regions access education and employment opportunities and also get to those many, many, many special events that are around our state but particularly in Melbourne and creating those connection points to be able to get to and from those special events. The city and the regions deserve that cohesive public transport network, and it is what is often called for – services that work well together to deliver the connection points that people need. In the previous session and in earlier in this session we were talking about that idea of options and being able to get to where you need to go, and that is really what we are building through our infrastructure agenda that we are able to now start switching on through our services agenda. Part of that is also needing to coordinate regional services with the metro rail network. Given the growth our state has experienced, that is becoming more and more important over time. These service uplifts that impact both our metropolitan lines and our regional lines are a really important part of that, on the back of the regional fare cap. Being able to offer and roll out those additional 200 weekend services and that 150 through 200 is also a part of that overall coordinated look at our network and how we continue to offer uplifts for Victorians no matter where they live.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you. You are right, I used the train to go from Wallan to Tallarook with some girlfriends for tourism purposes on the weekend, so trains take you anywhere. You have touched on some of the metro investments that have been made as well. I think it is really underestimated, the scale of the investment that has been made in the lines to allow for additional services. I think it is something like 2100 since 2015.

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: 2200 I think we are closer to now.

Lauren KATHAGE: Wow. How were we able to do that so quickly, add all those extra services?

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: Look, we have been able to deliver extra services because of, effectively, the infrastructure agenda that we have that sits alongside that. That often gets missed when we talk about infrastructure; it gets spoken about in a bubble. You do not do it for the sake of doing it; you do it so you can offer more services.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister and Ms Kathage. We are going to Ms Benham.

Jade BENHAM: Thank you, Chair. Minister, I am so glad you are so passionate about regional rail and how you consider that everyone in the regions, including the great north-west of this state, deserves regional rail. Are there any plans to investigate the viability of bringing back a Mildura train, even to Maryborough?

Lauren Kathage interjected.

Jade BENHAM: We are not talking about who got rid of it. This is budget estimates, looking to the future. I would suggest that it would be much more cost effective, and it would solve the sadness of so many kids who are missing out on their free public transport in the great north-west.

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: I know you do not want to dwell too much on the end of the passenger line rail service in Mildura, which I think last ran in September 1993. I will let you do the political maths on who was governing at that time. Look, there are currently no plans at this point in time. I cannot speak to future plans in this particular forum, but we know that the Mildura rail line continues to be a really important freight route. I know you are aware of that more than anyone else. It carries about 500,000 tonnes of containerised freight and bulk grain per annum, and we know how important that is, particularly economically, in supporting jobs and regional economies in the Sunraysia and Mallee regions. I know that this is one of many local issues that are particularly close to your heart. We have got big plans across regional Victoria. I have spoken to some of those and how we are boosting uplifts across our state. Our bus services in some of those regions that are not serviced comprehensively by rail become even more important. I am keen for us to be making sure that we are continuing to be able to deliver those uplifts to regional communities.

Jade BENHAM: Imagine the uplift if you brought back Mildura. But we will move on, because I have so many questions for you about regional rail and not much time. On the budget press release about the \$270 million – that was on 20 May – to deliver a more reliable rail network for regional Victorians with maintenance and upgrades, what are you doing differently this year compared to last year that it requires its own line item for maintenance?

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: I think this goes to – and Warwick might want to speak to this – our investment in V/Line. We have consistently, I believe, invested to make our regional rail services more reliable. That goes to part of the work in the regional rail revival works and upgrading the line.

Jade BENHAM: Sorry to interject – is any of it platform upgrades or lengthening?

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: No, it is maintenance.

Jade BENHAM: It is just maintenance?

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: It is largely maintenance. Of course there are also things that work in with this. One particular issue that we have had more recently on our V/Line network that has caused significant disruption has been an increase in kangaroo strikes.

Jade BENHAM: There are too many kangaroos, and they are too big.

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: And the drought has basically caused a bit of a change in animal behaviour, which has seen more interactions between trains and animals. That is where things like our bio-wash facilities and upgrading those – we have a new one coming on line at South Dynon – which will allow us to get carriages back up on the network more quickly, become really important complementary investments.

Jade BENHAM: Yes, but isn't that regular recurring funding? It has its own line item this year, which is different to previous years. Isn't that regular ongoing funding?

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: Warwick, would you like to speak to the maintenance profile and what that goes to?

Warwick HORSLEY: Sure. The \$270 million that you are referring to, I think, is the sustainability line. That is the additional regional rail revival program works that are continuing to date. That will then be turned on so that we can operate and maintain the additional services and those additional assets coming on line.

Jade BENHAM: Are they the Melton and Wyndham Vale lines? Which lines are they?

Warwick HORSLEY: The Waurn Ponds duplication project was completed last year. The Gippsland line upgrade is due to be completed this year. The Shepparton line upgrade, again, is on track for this year. So it is to maintain those new assets that are coming on board.

Jade BENHAM: Okay. The new VLocity trains – this is the performance statement on page 139 – that that are spoken about: are any of those going to be used on lines outside of the Melbourne area, or are they extra units for the overcrowded Melton and Wyndham Vale line services, because they have not been electrified yet?

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: VLocitys are on every line except Swan Hill.

Jade BENHAM: Every line except Swan Hill. Okay.

Jeroen WEIMAR: Maybe if I just add, Ms Benham, we have an order of 23 new VLocity trains. We are now seeing those come onto the network; they were made only a couple of years ago. They will boost the existing services. But we are now running VLocity trains all the way from Wodonga through to Warrnambool and all parts of our network. The remaining part to do is the Swan Hill section, which we are working on over the coming years.

Jade BENHAM: Is there a plan for that? Do we know when that is expected?

Warwick HORSLEY: 130 VLocity trains are on the network. The 130th came on last week, and there are another 11 trains to go.

Jade BENHAM: But the Swan Hill line – you do not know when that will start taking VLocity trains?

Jeroen WEIMAR: We do not have a committed time for that yet.

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: No, not a timeframe yet, but I can update you.

Jade BENHAM: Speaking of Swan Hill, though, that currently stops at Dingee – and this is getting back to the platform issue in a lot of regional stations – and Heathcote Junction on the Seymour line in fact because the trains are too long for the platforms themselves, so only the first few carriages are able to be used, which is awful for overcrowded carriages. If these services are used in this way for the platforms, why is it done this way? Are we exploring any other more innovative ways to board and unboard on these lines, rather than push everyone to the front?

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: Yes, we are always exploring innovative ways to use those lines. Obviously as a part of our ongoing upgrade works we look at opportunities to, say, lengthen platforms where it is appropriate to do so, and that has been a feature of, say, the Melton line upgrade, as an example.

Jade BENHAM: The Melton line upgrade?

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: That is just an example of where we take an opportunity when we are doing a whole corridor to say, ‘What can we do to lengthen platforms while we’re there?’ We continue to do that.

Jade BENHAM: And electrify that line?

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: Well, the Sunshine works are stage 1 of the Melton electrification, and that is a really important step forward in that project. I could wax lyrical about the Sunshine works, but I will not because I know that you will not appreciate me for doing that when you are –

Jade BENHAM: Not with 45 seconds to go.

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: No. When you are asking about innovative operational models, the answer is yes. I believe we deploy some of those on I think it is the Bendigo line on some services. We are always looking at ways that we can do that. There are some accreditation and rail safety considerations there for us to get, effectively, authorisation to be able to do that by ONRSR. So we need to make sure that whatever we do falls within that regulatory landscape. But those are active conversations and planning that we are doing day in, day

out to make sure that we are doing everything on our network to get more passengers on and as safely as possible.

Jade BENHAM: So why cut back the train length on shorter platforms like Warrnambool?

The CHAIR: Apologies, Ms Benham. We are going to Mr Tak.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you, Chair. Minister, I would still like to come back to the Metro Tunnel, but switching on the Metro Tunnel. Minister, I refer to page 83 of budget paper 3, which states that government is investing \$227 million to switch on the Metro Tunnel. Minister, can you explain what activities are funded under this initiative that will support the opening of this exceptionally important project for Victoria's future?

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: Thank you, Mr Tak, for the question. We spoke earlier about the operationalisation of services on that Cranbourne–Pakenham to Sunbury line, but in addition to that there is a lot of work that needs to be done in preparing the Metro Tunnel for opening, a lot – in fact almost all – of which to some extent is not particularly visible at this time. But that is around testing equipment throughout the stations, making sure that all the different systems that effectively surround the line itself work and work well together as they are meant to, so not only things like platform screen doors but also the escalators and the emergency systems. We know how critical that is for passenger safety, moving in and out of what are very large stations, most of them, to ensure that when we are ready to go on day one and we have got thousands, tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands of people coming through these stations all the systems are working in an integrated way to provide not only the best possible service delivery but also the safest possible access, movement and flow of passengers through those spaces. That means that we have got to do things like mass evacuation exercises and exercises that bring in emergency services personnel so that they are used to engaging with those spaces too and they can have their plans in place if incidents occur there.

We have also got trial operations themselves running, and that is effectively trains running through the tunnel. We have had more than 140,000 kilometres of test trains through the tunnel so far. Again, that is not only about making sure our trains work and the line is working the way it is meant to but also it is about making sure that it is integrating well with the platform screen doors. They are a very novel part of our network now. We have not had them before. Lots of other places in the world do. It seems a small thing to expect people to get used to, but we also know that wherever you introduce a new technology in a space with potentially lots of people, we have got to be ready for all possible eventualities with that and then, in the initial stages of opening, make sure that the public themselves are well used to how to interact and engage safely with those new technologies on our network as well.

It also includes the funding that you have referred to for installing wayfinding and customer information, and also what we call 'hyper-care', which is the additional network and customer support in that initial period of opening. That basically just means that you have got experts on hand if anything goes wrong as well as customer service staff to help Victorians with their changed journeys. We have taken lessons in that work from other jurisdictions who have opened up similar projects. We would speak fairly regularly to our counterparts in New South Wales but also in London about their experiences switching on, in the case of London, the Elizabeth Line and, in the case of Sydney, the Sydney Metro, so we can learn as much as we can about what they wish they had done differently, what they thought they did that really worked and where we can support passengers upon the opening of the tunnel and also how we can get ready for that ourselves. As a part of that funding we have also got funding provided, as I outlined at the beginning, to run those new services through those five stations. I think you can see that it is more complex preparation than people might think. We want to ensure we have got that turn-up-and-go service delivery that we have committed to, particularly on that Metro Tunnel corridor, but also that we have got all those systems working well in the lead-up and that we have got the people on hand in the immediate aftermath of opening to make sure that we have got the right support for the community when they get to use and see these assets for the first time. It is pulling it all together now. It is a very exciting part of the journey, so it is important that we resource it to get it right.

Meng Heang TAK: Cannot wait until the opening. Minister, you have talked about how switching on the Metro Tunnel is the biggest thing since the introduction of the city loop. Can you provide further details about why this project is so significant for our network?

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: Sure. A lot of attention so far has focused on those five brand new stations, and I can understand why: they are spectacular. I think that, when Victorians get to see them, they will be duly impressed. For those of us who have had the opportunity of taking people from our communities down for a bit of an early sneak peek, I think the reaction has been one of awe. Personally, I cannot wait till we can let that experience be shared with all Victorians. But it is also those twin tunnels and what they enable. I have already spoken about the fact that we have taken three of our busiest rail lines on the network out of the city loop and, in doing so, freed up capacity in the city loop that then allows us to open up more services across the entire network. If you think about how fast Victoria, and Melbourne in particular, is growing – we will be the size of London by the 2050s – and what that means for demand for services and the natural choke point that the city loop represented, the population has shifted a lot in the over 40 years since it was first built. If you cannot get more trains through that tunnel, then you cannot add more services onto lines, because they are all going to come to a grinding halt there. The idea of being able to add that capacity, which then enables us to give service uplifts to some of the fastest growing corridors in our metropolitan network, is really exciting.

We have been able to, through this budget, announce the first stage of that, but I think what is most exciting about it for me is that it opens up doors for us to be able to do this in an ongoing way as our population begins to grow. It is literally giving us room to grow that we did not have before. With that it opens up many opportunities for us as well, because it also makes sense of that next generation of infrastructure augmentation to our network, which would not make any sense but for the fact that we have done the Metro Tunnel. Now that we have done that, we can add more services, but we can also look at that next generation of projects that then allows us to do even more again. In that sense the project is an absolute game changer for our network.

I have talked about the stations; I have talked about those tunnels and what it means in taking those lines out of the loop. I could bore you silly with signalling. There are very few people on that side of the table that would appreciate it, but quite a few people on this side would.

The CHAIR: Mr Puglielli may appreciate it. We are going over to Mr Puglielli.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Chair. Good evening. I will start with a really specific question. Will kids be fined if they do not have their free PT card on them?

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: We are taking an educational approach to enforcement of that, which effectively means we want kids to have their cards and to use them. They will be urged to if they do not have them. There is good reason for that, and it is a question that has come up before, which is: why would you still have a card? Because particularly on our rail network, it is a really good way of us being able to monitor patronage, and therefore – not just our rail network, our whole network really – to be able to monitor where demand is really sparked and therefore where we need to add more services. That is a conversation I hope that we will be able to have at large with a lot of Victorian young people, to kind of explain to them that it is actually in their interests to use it, because if they come in large numbers – and I hope they do – we want to make sure that we plan for that.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. I will go to budget paper 3, page 89. There is a ‘Critical public and active transport upgrades’ line item. It is \$14.5 million total estimated investment. Can I ask: how much of that funding is for upgrades associated with level crossing removal projects?

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: What was the reference again, sorry?

Aiv PUGLIELLI: It is ‘Critical public and active transport upgrades’, page 89.

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: Okay, bear with me. Is this the 19.8, did you say?

Aiv PUGLIELLI: It is 14.5 TEI – that line item.

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: This might be the easier way to understand it: there is cycling infrastructure between Melton town centre, the train station and Weir Views. That is one project that has been provided for. There are also shared user paths to Watergardens station and activity centres on the Melton Highway and Sunbury line cycling corridor, and some improvements I think are included within that broader package as well.

Jeroen WEIMAR: And Minister, if I might – maybe this is another way of answering your question. The numbers in BP3 do not include the work around the level crossing removals we were doing as part of the normal scope; that is again more separate in the budget items. It may be worth, Mr Puglielli, just to get a sense of over the last 10 years or so – really through our level crossing removal program and other rail-related projects we have delivered around 260 kilometres of new and upgraded walking and cycling paths and lanes. DTP, separately through its extra cycling programs, has delivered about 145 kilometres of walking–cycling paths. That is the kind of split we see.

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: Effectively we have been using our Big Build to augment and enhance our public transport routes as well. West Gate Tunnel is another example of that. At every level crossing removal project we really look at where we can get better active transport links out of it as well.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. I am just moving to accessible tram stops. Can I ask what funding is allocated in the 2025–26 budget for the development of accessible tram stops on Gertrude and Smith Streets?

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: The funding provided in this budget, the allocation for accessible tram stops, is for the eight tram stops at Droop Street, so it is a corridor approach in Footscray. That brings us to now having about 16 level-access tram stops in delivery, building on previous investments as well that are underway, and we continue to effectively plan and work towards being able to deliver further tram stop upgrades in future budget cycles. We are basically working through that corridor approach now, in line with our tram plan, to get those efficiencies and better outcomes as we do that. We have obviously done some planning work on those other sites. This budget – with having already done the planning work also on that Droop Street, Footscray, area – delivers on now getting the funding underway for that, and that work continues as we work towards making our public transport network more accessible, with our tram network being a very important part of that.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Just to ask about that, is there a new timeline that the government is working from, because the federally legislated deadline was 2022. Is there a new timeline that can be provided to the committee?

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: We are upgrading our network year on year, incrementally, as much as we can. My understanding is that there is not a jurisdiction in the country that has met that 2022 deadline. I think that is a feature of the fact that we are all dealing with legacy networks that were designed at a time when accessibility was not front of mind, unfortunately. Our tram network is a particular sticking point with accessibility, which is why we have been working to roll out these accessibility upgrades. I think we have upgraded nearly 100 tram stops over our years in government, and that work continues. Tram stops are a part of it, and level-access tram stops are a big part of the tram network work that we are continuing, but also with that is the rolling stock itself. The G-class trams are a big addition to our network, and we will start testing on the network later this year.

Of course also on our tram network we have rolled out technology like NaviLens, and even through our franchise agreement with our new tram operator we have made accessibility a key focus, particularly through the provision of real-time passenger information, which might, for example, provide somebody with information about what rolling stock is heading their way, because some are more accessible than others. I think there are eight different tram models currently in operation our network, and that presents some challenges. The G-class will be the most accessible of them all, which is why we are so eager to get that out on our routes. Then in the meantime, as we incrementally move through upgrading not just our tram network but our entire public transport network, we look at those opportunities through advances in technology and the use of Travellers Aid and the like to be able to ensure that we are delivering an as accessible network as we can, acknowledging that we have still got more to do.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. I might move on. Budget paper 3, page 88, looking at trains, promises additional peak services on the Werribee line. Can I just confirm: do any of those additional services stop at South Kensington station?

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: I may have to check with –

Stuart JOHNS: We are still working through the timetable on that. It is on the Werribee line. Additional Werribee services typically do not stop at South Kensington, but the timetable is still under development.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. Thank you.

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: I will take that as a pitch, Aiv. Is it that time for development?

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. Great. On another matter, Elizabeth Street in North Richmond has been named by the department as a priority strategic cycling corridor, but we have just seen Yarra City Council vote to narrow the bike lanes and reinstate parking on the north side of the street, putting cyclists at risk, effectively. Can I ask: does the government intend to block Yarra's decision on this matter?

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: I might have to take that one on notice. That is not something that we have got to hand. Given it was a council decision, I think we would have to go and review that.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: That is all right.

Jeroen WEIMAR: Can I just – or do you have a question?

Aiv PUGLIELLI: I might move on, if that is all right. On the topic of statues, a copper butterfly statue was promised to Montmorency community for their station. It was commissioned for them but instead was installed at Eltham train station. People are white hot with anger about this in my community. Has the department costed a second statue?

Jeroen WEIMAR: No.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Why not?

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: What was that for, sorry?

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Has the department costed a second statue?

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: For?

Aiv PUGLIELLI: The butterfly statue for Montmorency train station.

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: Oh, this is following it being moved to Eltham where it more accurately reflected the surrounds?

Aiv PUGLIELLI: There will be Monty residents furious about that.

The CHAIR: Apologies. It could be a question for question time. We are going to Mr Galea.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon again, Minister, Secretary and officials. Secretary, I could not let this pass without commenting on your socks. You have some fabulous tram-themed socks on, I see. I think I will save the questions for how to get them afterwards, perhaps. Minister, if I can turn to a very important topic as well, which is bus services, there is significant investment in this budget outlined in budget paper 2 but also detailed in budget paper 3 across the output and asset initiatives. I see \$162 million announced in funding. Obviously I am very excited about some of the specific projects in the south-east, and we might get to that, time permitting, but if I can ask you in a broad sense what this funding will cover and what improvements we will see in our state bus network.

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: Beautiful, and in growth areas in particular.

Michael GALEA: Indeed

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: Beautiful. Look, Mr Galea, you are probably one of our most prominent advocates for bus services across our state and could easily get yourself a job as a bus planner in the department given the level of detailed knowledge you bring to this area, so I am not at all surprised to hear you asking a question about buses. But we, I think, as a community, are increasingly understanding the importance that buses play as a connector in our network. You and I have probably had conversations before around the way the public transport system has evolved here in Melbourne, where buses did not quite have the same level of prominence or sentimental attachment that they do in other jurisdictions that were far more reliant on them. Because we had a really well developed tram network our bus attachment did not quite develop the same way, but I think that is changing, and I think it is changing really, really rapidly, and I think that is because people see that buses can do a lot of heavy lifting, whether it be connecting people to rail lines or indeed getting them on those short local

trips to move in and around their local communities. So in that sense it is a very important part of an integrated transport system.

We have about 400 regular bus routes servicing metro Melbourne and local bus networks operating in regional towns and cities. In this year's budget as a part of that \$162 million package that I mentioned in my opening we are providing funding to deliver bus service improvements across growth areas in the north and the west, and that includes a package of new and extended routes connecting passengers in growth areas to train stations; that includes Riverwalk, Kingslea, Mount Atkinson, Cobblebank, Thornhill Park, Rockbank, Aintree and Deanside, and I should note that within those areas there have been some very active local communities who have been pushing for these services and in particular pushing for services that connect to other public transport modes, particularly for families with school-age children, who have wanted to ensure that their kids can get to the local train station safely. So these services represent a very big uplift for those communities.

We have also got a new and upgraded bus service in Tarneit to provide access to the new West Tarneit station, and I was out there with the Member for Tarneit only last week celebrating that service, and he was very eloquent in outlining what that will mean for people in different parts of his community. We have got bus service uplifts to improve access to the Wyndham law courts precinct, upgraded services to improve access to Caroline Springs town centre and Watergardens station as well and service uplifts this year to popular routes in Wyndham and Tarneit. This all sits broadly too within the government's bus plan, which was launched back in 2021, which has allowed us to redesign and strengthen so far about 110 local bus networks and give Victorian communities access to almost 6000 more services each week. What we have seen as we have made these uplifts to services and recalibrated sometimes the way they work – and through that being able to deliver more frequency as well – is we have seen people vote with their feet, effectively, and patronage levels of those services go up when we deliver the sorts of services that they want to see.

So since 2015 we have added over 20 000 weekly bus services to our network. Last year we announced a record package of about \$180 million of funding for new and improved bus services, and many of those are now in delivery, and you would be pleased to know some of them are out in your patch in Casey and Cardinia; others are in Hume and Wyndham. In the west, new bus routes will be delivered linking the Harpley estate and Cornerstone estate communities to Wyndham Vale station and Tarneit North residents to Tarneit and Laverton stations, running through that important employment precinct in Laverton North as well. The Chair will be well across some of these service uplifts, having advocated for many of them.

The CHAIR: Very happy.

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: Yes. We are always working to deliver new bus services. With this next package of work we will have the opportunity to get out there and speak to communities and consult and finalise those routes and frequencies and plans, and we always do that in partnership.

Michael GALEA: Fantastic. You mentioned Aintree as one of the areas receiving route upgrades as well, and just reflecting on a previous conversation with the Metro Tunnel, you spoke about the importance of updating not just train timetables but connecting services. I know there are going to be some route upgrades and reforms in the Aintree area to connect them to the Metro Tunnel as well. Can you talk to me a little bit about that initiative?

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: Yes, sure. I mentioned before that we had funded \$727 million to switch on and run services through the Metro Tunnel as a part of that Sunbury and Cranbourne–Pakenham line uplift following the switching on. And to assist residents living in Aintree, Deanside, Hillside and Fraser Rise communities, we are upgrading the existing bus network to coordinate with the Metro Tunnel services at Watergardens station. Now that we have got this corridor that is incredibly well serviced, what we can look to doing, in broad terms, is make sure that our bus services are doing that heavy lifting and getting people to a corridor that is going to deliver them really strong turn-up-and-go services through the Metro Tunnel. This is the ultimate in designing an integrated public transport network and allowing buses to do what they are there to do and pick up some of that heavy lifting and do that in an efficient way.

That work I just outlined would include replacing some existing routes, routes 444 and 461, with a new route, route 464, which would connect Aintree with Watergardens and Rockbank stations, and extending route 463 to improve connections to Caroline Springs town centre and to Watergardens station. This is a way of being able

to be smart in the way we plan our routes and look at how we actually get better value for the passenger, ultimately, in where these routes go and in the way that we can then deliver them and connect them to other important opportunities and modes especially. I have talked about the importance of connecting to rail corridors that are really well serviced. In an earlier part of the presentation I talked about more options, and this again builds on that idea. We have done all these infrastructure upgrades to give people more options or modes, whether that be roads, rail or indeed now bus.

Michael GALEA: Fantastic. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Minister. Minister and officials, that brings our time to an end this afternoon, sadly. Thank you very much for appearing before the committee today. The committee will follow up on 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 portfolio for police at 5:10 pm. I declare this hearing adjourned.

Witnesses withdrew.