

# **PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE**

## **Inquiry into the 2025–26 Budget Estimates**

Melbourne – Thursday 12 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**

Maree Edwards, Speaker, Legislative Assembly;

Shaun Leane, President, Legislative Council;

Bridget Noonan, Clerk of the Legislative Assembly;

Robert McDonald, Clerk of the Legislative Council; and

Trish Burrows, Secretary, Department of Parliamentary Services.

**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 you repeat 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 hearings and anything you say 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. Verified transcripts, presentations and handouts will be placed on the committee's website.

I welcome the Speaker of the Legislative Assembly, the Honourable Maree Edwards, as well as the President of the Legislative Council, the Honourable Shaun Leane, the Secretary of the Department of Parliamentary Services and clerks from the Legislative Assembly and Legislative Council. Welcome. Speaker or President, I am going to invite you to make an opening statement or presentation of no more than 5 minutes, after which time committee members will ask you some questions.

**Visual presentation.**

**Maree EDWARDS:** Thank you very much, Chair. It is a pleasure to be here for our presentation. We would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting today. Of course our Parliament House stands on the lands of the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung people. We also acknowledge traditional owners across Victoria and elders past and present. One of the things that we are very proud of here at our Victorian Parliament is our continued progress on the parliamentary departments' *Reflect Reconciliation Action Plan* and our disability access and inclusion plan, both of which we are happy to go into later if you wish. All parliamentary officers have participated in cultural competency training, which I think is very valuable. Our Aboriginal youth partnership with Koorie Academy – you can see from the picture that that was a very successful event that was held in our Parliament Gardens. And there was the installation of the First Nations plaque in the vestibule, which many members attended the unveiling of earlier this year.

One of the things that we have been able to put in place this year, for the first time in the 170-year history of this Parliament, which is next year, is the beautiful new carers facility. This has come off the back of a number of members of Parliament in the Assembly who have recently had babies, including obviously Lauren on the committee here. I am not sure where your baby is, but it would be nice if you could bring them in. The carers facility came off the back of a lot of conversations that were had in the lead-up to the birth of those babies and how we could best support the women members of Parliament who were having the babies, as well as future members who might have babies. This is a conversion of two office spaces just on the underground of the first

level. The room has been named Charlotte's Room, after Charlotte Marshall, who was the first baby that was breastfed in the chamber. At the time she was a stranger in the house, and Judy Maddigan, who was Speaker at the time, changed the rules to allow the baby to stay in the chamber. So we have called the room Charlotte's Room, and it is being very well used, particularly by three members of the Parliament, who are cross-party. Of course they share the cost of carers for the children, and we are happy to answer more questions about that.

One of the other things that we do very well here in our Parliament is open our Parliament to many, many organisations and people and of course run our fabulous education tours as well as engage with many schools and students across the board. I will not go into detail with all of that, but there has been a lot of engagement, not just with our metropolitan schools but with 40 regional schools recently. I had the pleasure of participating in a few of those school programs, particularly with the outreach team, in Bendigo, which is my electorate, just recently. I attended I think five sessions, and my goodness, they are so good.

Of course we want to make sure that our Parliament is open to as many people as possible across a diverse range of areas. The Speaker's breakfast series, which I have been running, has enabled organisations such as Lifeline, Red Cross and the rural youth organisation Youthrive to attend. We have also had our International Women's Day event, which was an invitation to women first responders and to members to bring women first responders from their electorates into our Parliament. And thank you to the President, because he organised the Special Olympics athletes to be in Parliament and receive some awards.

I am going to hand over to Shaun, our President, to continue the presentation.

**Shaun LEANE:** I suppose if we just flick through the presentation – I think Maree has really covered a lot of good work that the Parliament has aspired to this term. I think if you look at the education program and the amount of teachers that have come here for training and professional development – I mean, it is a great opportunity. The team that organises that for the Parliament do a great job, and it is continually expanding.

Then if we move on to the next slide please, we have got just briefly a very active CPA branch here in Victoria – we are really proud of it – to the point that we led a topic at the recent international forum. Michael Galea might ask a question about this, because he led it and did a great job, and we achieved what we were after.

**The CHAIR:** I am going to stop you there, President. I do like that photo. It was a very good conference, I have to say. We are going to go straight to Ms Benham.

**Jade BENHAM:** Thank you, Chair. It is lovely to have you both here, all of you here, for the last session. I want to start with security and particularly security for MPs. We have seen parliaments across the world with an increase of security incidents against MPs, so what is being done to protect us, I suppose, outside of the parliamentary precinct?

**Shaun LEANE:** It is a very difficult area, and it is an important area too, so thanks for the question. A lot of work has been done in electorate offices, as you know. It might be physical work around how people access our meeting rooms and how we do, barriers that have been installed for our staff that are front of house and also the CCTV cameras and the work that is being monitored on those. As far as when members of Parliament are out at community events, that is –

**Jade BENHAM:** It is tough.

**Shaun LEANE:** We cannot give you an answer on that today. I think that is a bigger issue than the Parliament departments. I think that could be whole of government – with the work of us, but it is a bigger issue. We constantly think about ways that we can physically assist in MP safety. In the middle of this year, hopefully next month, we are going to actually gut 55 St Andrews. We are going to make those committee rooms into spaces where MPs and staff have one entry and members of the public will have another entry, and so the scanning process will be completely divorced from the MPs and the staff. In that, as you know now –

**Nick McGOWAN:** It sounds like a panic room.

**Shaun LEANE:** It is not a panic room, because –

**Jade BENHAM:** It is a back door.

**Shaun LEANE:** It is just a fact that there can be hearings when people come in and, fair enough – I do not judge them – they are angry about an issue. The hearings hear from a witness, then the people in the gallery are a bit fired up and sometimes they do not enjoy the answers that all of the MPs have given. The MPs and staff are actually walking through that crowd. We are constantly thinking about this and whether we ever get it to a state where it is perfect – probably not. It is a difficult area.

**Jade BENHAM:** Do you know –

**Maree EDWARDS:** Sorry, I was just going to add to that, because with the committee rooms and the two separate entries, it is not just about those people who might be angry. It is also about the sensitivity of some of the issues that are raised in our committees where people have very emotional issues to deal with. It is also about protecting some of the members of the public when they might be facing some pretty gruelling and challenging situations when they are presenting to those committees.

**Jade BENHAM:** In the interests of witness protection.

**Maree EDWARDS:** Yes, of course – that too.

**Jade BENHAM:** Do we have an idea or do we monitor how many security incidents have been reported by MPs outside of Parliament?

**Maree EDWARDS:** No, not really. I think VicPol have a role to play here too. A recent trip that I had to another jurisdiction gave me – and the Clerk, too – some really good ideas around how we could do better. Obviously we have our buttons to press in our electorate offices if there is an incident, and we have good security in our electorate offices. But I understand there is a growing sense of concern, fuelled a little bit by I think some extremism, some conspiracy theories and anti-authority ideology that exists in the world more broadly, that creates some concern for when we as elected representatives are out doing our job. Whether we are standing at a supermarket doing a listening post or attending an event, if there is a potential for a security incident that we are made aware of, we can certainly get VicPol involved. But our jurisdiction here is the precinct and to make sure that members and staff – because this is a workplace – are safe in their workplace.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Just to be clear, Speaker, we do not know how many members of Parliament have logged security incidents with the security department within Parliament – or is that a separate matter?

**Maree EDWARDS:** For their electorate offices.

**Shaun LEANE:** With our security? We can.

**Nick McGOWAN:** How many was that for the last 12 months?

**Shaun LEANE:** Can we take that on notice?

**Nick McGOWAN:** Sure.

**Shaun LEANE:** We will have what has been –

**Nick McGOWAN:** Internal.

**Maree EDWARDS:** With VicPol, yes, we do.

**Shaun LEANE:** No, with our security.

**Nick McGOWAN:** With our security, as opposed to VicPol.

**Shaun LEANE:** Yes, of course, because whatever has been logged will be there.

**Maree EDWARDS:** Yes. But just across the precinct more broadly?

**Nick McGOWAN:** Well, the precinct would include the electorate offices of course.

**Maree EDWARDS:** There has been a 23 per cent decrease in security incidents in the last little while – 12 months – across the precinct and about a 9 per cent decrease across electorate offices.

**Jade BENHAM:** That is interesting. So we would have no idea about any incidents that involve MPs' families outside of here unless it is reported?

**Maree EDWARDS:** That would be very private information, and I certainly would not want to canvass any of that in a public forum.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Just in terms of security, and I have raised this three years running, to the left of me right now there is a point of egress, let us call it, that remains – and you could drive a truck through it; let us be frank.

**Maree EDWARDS:** The what, sorry? I missed that.

**Nick McGOWAN:** There is a point at which you can exit and enter this facility, and you can drive a truck through it. For three years straight nothing has happened, and I do not know why that is the case.

**Shaun LEANE:** Which?

**Nick McGOWAN:** The gate literally to my left-hand side. That gate opens. For three years I have raised this issue. If we are going to be serious about security, I do not understand it. There have been instances where I have had to communicate with people – and I raised this here I think in fact – that if they are not registered here, they should not be coming in through that point. I just do not know why that has not been fixed.

**Maree EDWARDS:** We are about to have the installation of a perimeter intrusion detection system, which will be up and running by the end of this year, which will I think alleviate some of the concerns that you have just raised.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. We are going to go to Ms Kathage.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Thank you very much, Chair, Speaker, President and officials. When I was sitting here last year I had just found out I was pregnant, and nobody in the world knew except for me and the little bean in my tummy. This time, fast-forward, there is a bub along the way, and –

**Shaun LEANE:** I thought you were going to say something different.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** No, I have stopped drinking the water. I became very suspicious after the last year in Parliament.

**Jade BENHAM:** We all did.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** We all did. Back then I asked you about how this is going to be a contemporary workplace for the people who work here, not just the MPs but the staff as well, who outnumber us easily, so I want to pick up on that again. There has been a big change. Obviously, I could not be there for the opening of Charlotte's Room because I had just had bub. But can you talk a little bit about the history of that, how we got to that moment and what it represents to have that dedicated space for carers?

**Maree EDWARDS:** Thanks, Lauren. I know that your little one is absolutely gorgeous. I think I may have had an inkling that you were expecting at our last PAEC hearing last year – I think I might have mentioned that to you, actually. Anyway, I think the fact that we had five members of Parliament all expecting at around the same time put a little bit of pressure on this building and us as Presiding Officers to say, 'We need to bring this building into the 21st century.' The reality is without the members there is no Parliament. If we cannot support the members in their everyday lives and the things that happen in their everyday lives, such as having babies, then we are not just not supporting women, we are not supporting members. And this is not just about the members now who are requiring that room, but that childcare space can accommodate up to eight toddlers or eight crawling babies. So, thinking ahead, it was not just about the five babies that were going to be born last late last year and early this year.

The three members of Parliament, cross-party, who came to see me who were all due around the same time indicated that they wanted a space where they could have their children minded when Parliament was sitting, and they were prepared to meet the cost of bringing in child carers. That was a combined effort on their part to pay for those educators who have been coming in to care for those children. It was a very significant moment. Take all the politics out of all of this – it was about supporting members of Parliament, irrespective of their background or their politics, to make sure that they could do their job when they were here in Parliament, and I hope that it will serve the Parliament for many years to come.

There is obviously always more that needs to be done, particularly in relation to, as you mentioned, staff. But we are landlocked on this site, as you would be aware. It is challenging in a very heritage, old building to find space to do these things. But for the moment this has met the need for now and hopefully will into the next term of Parliament and maybe the one beyond. After that there may be a requirement to look at alternatives. But if we want to encourage more women to be members of Parliament, then we need to accommodate and support them, particularly if they want to have children. It is also there for men, fathers who want to have their children minded here as well. It is not actually a childcare room as such, it is a facility that is there for members to come in and leave their children, but they need to bring their own carers in. So grandparents are welcome to come in and mind the children, fathers, uncles, sisters, whatever. But we provide the space, they provide the carer.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** I think it is really great, the way it is ungendered. When journalists first contacted me when they learned I was pregnant, I pointed out to them that more male MPs had had babies so far in the term than women. So it is not just the women that are adding.

**Maree EDWARDS:** And I think we have not probably made that as clear as we should have, because it was the women members who were having the babies, but it is obviously there for any member of Parliament who needs a childminding facility onsite.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Thank you very much for what you are adding there. Are there any other examples you could offer around that strategic priority of a contemporary space?

**Maree EDWARDS:** Yes. I think the Clerk and the Secretary and I have discussed this at length, and I have visited a number of jurisdictions to see what they are doing in relation to child care. In Victoria, for example, in Canada they have a childcare facility onsite – sorry, they are just about to build a new facility onsite – which will accommodate both members of Parliament and staff, but they have a lot more space outside of their big, historic building than we do here. It is really challenging, and we do not want to be seen to be saying, ‘This is just for members of Parliament,’ because it seems a little bit elitist, right? Unfortunately at the moment it is because we did not have anything else – we did not have anything else – apart from a few rooms here and there scattered throughout the building, which were basically feeding rooms. It is a long-term plan, I think, to think about how we can do it better and accommodate more people, more families.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Great. I think it is also good to recognise that for the people who wish to use those facilities it is not that they necessarily want to be at Parliament for being at Parliament’s sake but they want to represent the people in their electorate. So if the people in their electorate are to I guess be present through them in Parliament –

**Maree EDWARDS:** The whole point of course is to ensure that MPs can do their job to the best of their ability, and that is entirely why Shaun and I – that is our purpose: to make sure that members have no barriers to performing their duties.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Yes. I think it has certainly reached critical mass.

**Maree EDWARDS:** We love it, we love it, and I am very happy that it is just below my window in my office.

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

**Jade BENHAM:** Thank you. The report into DPS IT operations by the Frame Group was in the parliamentary annual report 2023–24 and due April last year. What is the outcome of that report?

**Shaun LEANE:** Perhaps go to the Secretary.

**Maree EDWARDS:** Go to the Secretary to answer that one. Thanks, Trish.

**Trish BURROWS:** Thank you very much for the question. Obviously the provision of IT services to members and electorate officers is a core part of the service delivery from the department. That review from Frame really identified a series of opportunities that we could implement. We have taken that report and from that developed a technology road map as to what areas we need to focus on first. There are some foundation items that need to be dealt with, which as a user of the service you will not necessarily see, but the back end of it is being improved so that the front end can be improved. The idea that there are less systems that integrate with each other – enter data once, and it goes to all of the systems – is that sort of fundamental principle, to apply that to looking at how we maintain currency with those systems, as well as, ultimately, the artificial intelligence is here, not around the corner. So some of that foundation response that comes from the work that Frame did – with the team; it was a consultancy but worked very much with our IT team – to determine what the priorities were really sets us up for success going forward.

**Jade BENHAM:** Okay. Thank you.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Speaker, the employee benefits or the wages paid essentially to members of Parliament was \$268 million in 2024–25, and that is \$16 million more than expected. Are you able to provide a breakdown of how much we paid to the previous members of Parliament versus the existing members of Parliament?

**Maree EDWARDS:** I might get the Secretary to answer that one, Mr McGowan.

**Trish BURROWS:** We can take that on notice and provide you with the table. The quantum really comes from the tribunal. There have been 128 members for a long time. It is pretty standard, but the increases come from the tribunal and we just simply apply those increases.

**Nick McGOWAN:** How many former members are on defined benefits?

**Trish BURROWS:** I definitely need to take that on notice.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Likewise, do we have a median cost for the vehicles provided to members of Parliament – so how much it costs for each vehicle, in the department's assessment – inclusive of petrol, registration, insurance et cetera?

**Trish BURROWS:** That information would come from VicFleet. The department does not manage the vehicles; the vehicles come through VicFleet, who manage what costs are associated with leasing vehicles. The costs come to us, but how much a different car costs is not something we negotiate at all. That comes from VicFleet.

**Shaun LEANE:** I think they answer to the DTF.

**Nick McGOWAN:** I appreciate that, but can you provide us with a breakdown of on average – or if not, in the total sum – how much the Parliament pays in terms of the provision of those vehicles, plural, so obviously subtracting the members who do not receive a vehicle? And WorkCover premium: can you tell us how much the Parliament pays in the WorkCover premium, Speaker or Secretary?

**Trish BURROWS:** It is another one I would need to take on notice. I do not have the literal number here with me.

**Nick McGOWAN:** In terms of WorkCover claims, can you tell us how many WorkCover claims there are here in the Parliament?

**Trish BURROWS:** I just need a little bit more information from you. Do you mean how many are currently open, how many claims have ever been – which number?

**Nick McGOWAN:** I think 'currently open'; I think 'ever been' might stretch too far.

**Trish BURROWS:** Currently open? Okay. I will take that on notice as well.



**Nick McGOWAN:** Air quality: I have noticed that for the last two weeks there have been these ferocious little fans in the new wing, and one of the concerns I know other members have is that there is nothing that might potentially indicate the quality of the air, notwithstanding that they are trying to dry what I guess is a mould-affected area. So there is some concern that obviously what we are doing by fanning those mould-affected areas is we are fanning all the spores right across the entire parliamentary precinct – at least for the backbenchers if not the ministers – and (1) there is the substantive issue, because obviously for the entire time I have been here it has never been fixed, and (2) the equally substantive issue in terms of air quality control is whether we have any gauge of what we are now propagating throughout that newish facility.

**Shaun LEANE:** It is constantly monitored, but we are happy to supply you with any data that has been collected. It is a result of a leaking building.

**Maree EDWARDS:** Which we inherited, by the way.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Happy for you to name those who are responsible. I do not mind one little bit.

**Maree EDWARDS:** Can I assure you, Mr McGowan, the fans are not directed specifically at your office.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Yes, but I find myself in the bowels of the organisation.

**Shaun LEANE:** We would probably need more time to talk about the leaking building than 1½ minutes. But I cannot express how greatly disappointed I am and I think everyone sitting on this side of the table is.

**Nick McGOWAN:** In your predecessors?

**Shaun LEANE:** With that building, as far as it is not that old. And it is an award-winning building. It won many awards. Actually a previous leader of the department, who is not here now, commissioned a coffee table book about it called *An Unfinished Masterpiece*.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Well, that was very accurate.

**Shaun LEANE:** Not about ‘masterpiece’, but ‘unfinished’ – because it leaks. It is not watertight. So therefore what we are doing with the books is we are using those on the roof. What we are doing with the books and the awards now – you will notice the awards are gone too – is we are using those on the roof to try and stop the leaks.

**Maree EDWARDS:** Mr McGowan, in relation to the spores that you are referring to, I can assure you that any mould that is found is addressed immediately, but there have been no issues identified in relation to the spreading of the mould. We have ongoing testing to make sure that if there is any concern it is addressed immediately. We would not put any member’s health at risk. We just would not. As you know, some members have been moved while we have addressed some of those issues. We will be monitoring that constantly. There will be some work done over the winter break to address some of those immediate issues, particularly in relation to the leaks. We probably will not be putting books across the top to stop it, but it is not a bad idea.

**Nick McGOWAN:** I think the Chair is too scared to cut you off, Speaker. This is the first time this has happened in two weeks, I can assure you.

**Maree EDWARDS:** And we have had some rain. Clearly, we have not had rain for a while. When we have a big rain event, that is usually when we notice that there is an exacerbation of the issue. We hope to have some of those immediate issues addressed very soon over the winter break, and there is a longer-term plan that we are waiting to determine how best to proceed with for the bigger issue, which is the rooftop garden.

**Nick McGOWAN:** The high line. What was the issue there, sorry?

**The CHAIR:** We are coming back this way, Deputy Chair. As much as I do not like to cut the Speaker off, Mr Hilakari, I do not want to eat into your time.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Thank you, Speaker, President, clerks and Secretary, for your attendance this afternoon. I am not going to put you on the direct spot and ask whether you are going to slide down the slide for the MND freeze event on Monday. I will not put you on the spot for that. It is noted, Speaker, that you have

donated already, which is fantastic. But a big shout-out that the MND event will be in the Parliament on Monday. People can donate. It is publicly available on Emma's Facebook and all other places. We will see the deputy leader Ben Carroll and the opposition leader Brad Battin being rolled down there, so if you want to see some of your polties frozen up, it is important for you to get along and get around.

But I ask about the accessibility of the Parliament, and I think Ms Vulin has really highlighted really directly to many of us the accessibility for MPs but also for staff and visitors to the building. I am just hoping you can talk about some of the changes that we have made and those to come.

**Maree EDWARDS:** We have had a disability action plan in place for some time. It is actually in the process of being renewed. But I think having a member of Parliament with motor neurone disease has really highlighted – and again a bit like the pregnant members of Parliament – how non-accessible this building can be for people who have issues with getting around. Emma, to her credit – and we always make a point of making sure that Emma knows as well that it is not just about Emma, because she is very self-effacing like that – has guided us really well to better understand the needs of someone who has limited ability to get around this building. The first and obvious one was the rails in the chamber in the Assembly, only on her side to start with so she could get to the back bench, but now we have put them across the whole of the chamber, because it seemed like a sensible thing to do. Then there are issues with the opening of doors. Many of the doors in this building are very heavy and very hard to open and close, so we have got some automatic door opening and closing for Emma herself in her own office. There have been some modifications to her office to assist her, particularly with opening cupboards and things like that.

It has been a real learning curve, I think, for us as Presiding Officers but also for staff as well in here, because we take this place for granted so often, to make sure that the public who are coming into our building can get good access. It is one of the disadvantages of having a 170-year-old building that it was never built obviously for people who have mobility issues. So we are slowly, slowly getting in place some measures, not just to support Emma but to support any future members of Parliament who might have a disability. At Westminster they allow guide dogs onto the floor of the house for members who are blind. We have never had to face that reality, but there may come a time in the future when we will have to think about those sorts of things. Emma obviously will be in a wheelchair. We will need to accommodate her in the chamber with her wheelchair, as we may have to do in the future for other members with a disability who might be elected.

Trish, did you want to add to any of that, because I know you are a bit more across exactly what we have done across the Parliament – and the chambers, Bridget – in relation to supporting access?

**Trish BURROWS:** I think, as the Speaker said, the Member for Pakenham has been extraordinary in being able to point out even minor things that can make a difference to someone who has a mobility issue. What it has made staff more aware of is those tiny things can work well, whether it is how you pull a drawer out and those sorts of handles and those sorts of things, both here and of course in the electorate office as well. That has made us more aware, and for future members I think the parliamentary staff are going to be much more able to have those conversations and make improvements.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** I might go to a different matter, Speaker, which is access to the gallery. You would not be shocked but many would be shocked to hear that question time is often sold out. There are too many people who would like to be there –

**Maree EDWARDS:** We are too popular, aren't we? I cannot help that.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** and cannot attend. Is there an ability to increase the capacity in the upper gallery in particular, because most days we are turning people away – from the public – who would like to attend?

**Maree EDWARDS:** At the moment we have a 15-person limit in the upper gallery, and there are a couple of reasons for that. One is safety. During the winter break we will be having some modifications in the Assembly which will replace the current banister, because it is very wobbly and it is quite dangerous. That will be happening during the winter break this year, which means that then we will be able to actually allow more people into the upper gallery, and that is for the safety of the public as well as for the members. And of course there have been some incursions into the gallery. People are required to be registered to come into the Parliament. That is one way of ensuring that if there is a disruption, we know who they are, we know why they

are doing it and we can put some sanctions in place. We do not want our democracy disrupted, particularly in the chamber. We are doing our job. I think that it is more an issue of safety in relation to the balcony.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** It sounds like it is going to be addressed over the winter break, which is fantastic.

**Maree EDWARDS:** Yes, exactly, it is. We will have a new balcony.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** I still expect it to be a sold-out event every time.

**Maree EDWARDS:** I am sure it will be a sold-out event, and we will allow capacity in the upper gallery just for you, so they can see you get thrown out.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Thank you, Speaker.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr Hilakari. We are going to Ms Benham.

**Jade BENHAM:** Thank you, Chair. Just quickly back to the annexe: why didn't the builder fix the defects in that building? Because there are clearly defects. Some of it in the lower level is clearly groundwater, rather than the roof.

**Shaun LEANE:** Thank you so much for that question.

**Jade BENHAM:** You are so welcome.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** What is your professional expertise on this, President?

**Shaun LEANE:** Forget my professional expertise. We have had a high-level engineering company look at this award-winning building. Basically, the issue is it is not necessarily groundwater; it is the fact that on the roof – the garden on the top – there is an award-winning handrail and an award-winning membrane. If you have a look at other buildings that use the top of the roof, the handrails are screwed to the side of the building. These ones are special, because we wanted to win an award, and they are screwed to the top of the roof. Then different types of metal were used, and it caused this corrosive thing like a battery. Then the membrane did not go all the way, or did not go past that award-winning handrail. So what we are going to have to do after the writs are signed and there is a long break in Parliament next year is remove the whole garden and replace the membrane. We are considering what we do with the handrail. Then we will take an opportunity to think, 'Well, will we put the garden back up there, or will we make it a more usable space?' because putting a garden on top of a roof does not help the membrane situation anyway. But what I can say to you, probably to answer your question about defects, is we are looking at if we have got any legal recourse on the original people that designed it and built it. The builder phoenixed – has gone – so that is a problem. But we are going to get some more advice from experts around the engineering, because I suppose, when I went on my rant before, we are very disappointed. This is taxpayers money. We are very, very disappointed. It is not that old a building.

**Jade BENHAM:** And it is not a cheap exercise, I can imagine, removing that. How much is that going to cost? What has been budgeted for that?

**Shaun LEANE:** We still have not landed on that amount. It is going to be millions.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Perhaps we should go for the former members who made the decision.

**Shaun LEANE:** Well, it is not about the decision being made. It is about the design and the materials and the construction, and that is why we need to get further expert advice. I thought I knew a bit about building, but this has been a great learning experience about how not to do things like this. Hopefully that acquits your question.

**Jade BENHAM:** Thank you. That is a very thorough answer.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Speaker, can I ask: how many of the EOs are not currently disability compliant?

**Maree EDWARDS:** Electorate offices – I would hope none, but I might ask the Secretary to confirm. There are five Members of Parliament who currently do not have an electorate office –

**Nick McGOWAN:** Excluding those.

**Maree EDWARDS:** two due to flooding in their offices, and three, I think, who are due to go into their new EOs later this year. Everyone else is settled, but I am not sure about disability access. I would hope that everyone has disability access, because it is a requirement.

**Trish BURROWS:** Outside of the temporary offices, the disability access for members of the public coming in is okay in all of the offices. I will confirm that, but I am pretty confident about that. The disability access issues usually come inside the electorate office, because the older leases were much smaller than the current standard – so making sure that if you had an electorate officer who required disability access they could move around the office. We are not compliant once you are behind that front counter in a number, and I can get that number for you. But that is where the main issue is. Until we are able to have all of the electorate offices to standard, we will keep having this internal problem trying to fit everything within a lower square metreage.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Thank you. If you could provide that – perhaps by chamber might be useful as well. Speaker, the portrait for Premier Andrew: is that being hung shortly?

**Maree EDWARDS:** Every former Premier has an opportunity to have their portrait done and hung in Queens Hall. We have had some initial conversations, and that is basically where we are.

**Jade BENHAM:** What about the bronze statue?

**Maree EDWARDS:** That is not a matter for us as presiding officers.

**Jade BENHAM:** Secretary, can I ask a question about the project at the moment underway to install exterior lights on Parliament House for commemorative occasions, like we do see around Melbourne? What is the cost for this project?

**Trish BURROWS:** We will come back to you with the exact cost. It is in the millions, just to let you know. The facade lighting project will provide lights for the entire Spring Street facade and light up the architectural features every day, as well as being available for, as you said, those special occasions –

**Jade BENHAM:** Great.

**Trish BURROWS:** Programmable lighting will be available. In addition to that, if you are out the front currently, there are some dull spots out there as well, so it does provide more OH&S-compliant components to it as well. In the past when there has had to be coloured lights put up our buildings and grounds team have done a great job setting up the temporary ones, but we will not need to do that anymore, and that will also be of great assistance to make sure that is safe as well.

**Jade BENHAM:** Terrific. Thank you. In addition to that, can you provide an update on the construction and restoration works that are going on? The Member for Gippsland South has said that he does not know this building without scaffolding or construction and restoration works going on.

**Maree EDWARDS:** He has been here too long.

**Jade BENHAM:** Yes, exactly. That was my response. But is there any update on when that might be complete, or is it ongoing forever?

**Maree EDWARDS:** For the first time in 20 years, last Christmas the scaffolding was taken down. That stonemasonry work started 20 years ago and has done the whole perimeter of the building.

**Jade BENHAM:** The stonemasonry is done?

**Maree EDWARDS:** In fact there were apprentices who started as stonemasons on that and then retired 20 years later, so it has been a very worthwhile project for stonemasons. In terms of the east wing, that is the project that is currently underway, and there is still scaffolding out there. I think the crane has gone now; there is no crane anymore. We are getting very close to the east wing being ready for use. It has been a long project, but again I say this is a 170-year-old building. You come across problems as you go with buildings like this – not to say that that is any excuse. We also had the COVID interruption to the works there as well.

**The CHAIR:** I am going to interrupt you there, Speaker. I apologise, I apologise, I apologise –

**Maree EDWARDS:** That is all right.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Galea.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you all for joining us. President, in the presentation you touched briefly on the important twinning relationships that the Victorian Parliament has with Fiji, with Tuvalu and with Nauru. Given that it is a very important part of the work that we do in the Pacific, President, can you tell me a little bit more about this program and where you see that moving in the upcoming financial year?

**Shaun LEANE:** Thank you. I might just start briefly and maybe pass to Bridget, if she can supplement, and Robert. They will know firsthand the great dealings that they have had with our twinning partners. Can you wave to the gallery in this? I do not want the Chair to pull me up. We have actually got a group of people from the Fiji Parliament sitting here today doing some training. They are going to be here next week sitting in our question time, so I think we all have to do the right thing and put on a nice show. I really want to thank the MPs and the Parliament staff members that have been involved in engaging with our partners here and also sometimes in their jurisdiction. We have had a number of interactions. We look for support around committee work. I think we have got twins interested in our PAEC as well, so you have all done a great job.

I think I might have mentioned this, hopefully not at the previous PAEC, Mr Galea, there are but small things – well, they sound like sound small things, but they are probably actually big things. We have had a couple of our communication experts that work for the Parliament go to the Nauru Parliament and set up a Facebook page for the Nauru Parliament, and it has gone really well in that a lot of residents of Nauru now like that page and are keeping up with what is actually happening in their parliament. It is their main way of accessing what is happening in their parliament. We have a great relationship, and I know, Michael, you have experienced it yourself. As I say, it is not a one-way street; we learn a lot off them as well. It has been a fantastic partnership over a long time.

Bridget, did you want to speak on any other things that are ongoing or we have done?

**Bridget NOONAN:** Sure. Thanks, President. I would like to acknowledge the contribution of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, who provide some funding – really our twinning relationships are auspiced by our CPA branch. CPA Australian region holds a trust account that funds some activities for the twinning program, but the bulk of our work with Fiji is funded by our partners at Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. I acknowledge their support and their drive. The United Nations Development Programme also supports and coordinates some of our activities – so many players in the twinning space.

We are looking, by the end of this month, to support the Fiji Parliament with a floating budget office, which is essentially a flying squad of experts who would support a committee such as this in Fiji's budget analysis. Some members who may be sitting around this table have supported new member induction in Tuvalu, which has been really fantastic, and we are really excited to be hosting a delegation visit led by the honourable Speaker from Fiji next week. I hope that some members of this committee would have the opportunity to meet with him.

**Michael GALEA:** Fantastic. Thank you. Certainly a worthwhile program, and it has been very good to be part of it.

Speaker, just before, you mentioned that there are currently five members without electorate offices. Secretary, what is the average amount of time that MPs are without electorate offices when it happens?

**Trish BURROWS:** Thanks for the question. There is not really an average time that they are without, because of the complexity in finding a property and leasing a property. The two times when it is very hard to predict is after an election, when different members are joining and might want slightly different locations, and the second is when the property owner does not allow for an extension – they want to use it for a different purpose and perhaps unexpectedly advised us of that, so they are out. I suppose the third time of course is when the office floods and the landlord perhaps will not come to the party in fixing that, so were not ready to find a new location. In some regional centres it can take a very long time to actually find a suitable property. There is

sometimes just one high street, if you like, that you need to locate in, and that can be quite difficult and take a longer time. But there is not really an average time.

**Michael GALEA:** Sure.

**Maree EDWARDS:** Can I just add too, Mr Galea, that when the boundaries change, it can affect where a member sits inside their electorate, so there may be a need to look for an alternative electorate office. Sometimes that is not possible immediately; it does take time to relocate. The boundary changes at the last election really impacted on how members were rolled out across new EOs.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you, Speaker, and thank you, Secretary. There is some cheeky self-interest in that question, as you know.

**Maree EDWARDS:** I suspected.

**Michael GALEA:** I will say it is not for any lack of effort on the part of your property services team, so please pass on my thanks to them. But we do have obviously those situations arise, and particularly wanting to be front and centre in the community and having that accessibility is really important for all MPs. Are there any strategies that you are looking to implement to reduce the amount of time that MPs are out of their electorate offices when that does happen?

**Trish BURROWS:** The key strategy used is to have a good list of serviced offices [inaudible]. Even if we cannot provide an office that fits the standard, just having a member in the community and then being able to use community facilities for meetings and those sorts of things means at least they are in their electorate. There are a number of members that the Presiding Officers have referred to today that are in temporary offices but are in their electorates and being able to access that. The property team do a very regular search for what properties might become available, and members are a great source of information as well as to what properties are becoming available, because often they will be at a local industry event and they will find that a business is moving. So feeding information back in also helps a lot.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you.

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

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you. Good afternoon. Non-government electorate offices often find that the 2.5 FTE staffing entitlement is frankly not enough to properly scrutinise Bills, to serve constituents and to communicate broadly in our electorates, so the result of this is that many of us are then hiring staff on a casual hourly wage to supplement the 2.5 FTE. In practice these staff are often not casual at all; they are integral parts of our teams who may go on to stay for years at a time. However, because of the staffing entitlements of the Parliament we are told there is no way to convert these staff to permanent employment if the 2.5 FTE has already been allocated. So can I just query: are we working in an exception to national employment standards that allows our casual DPS staff, including electorate officers, to continue working these regular casual hours for more than six months without being offered permanent work?

**Maree EDWARDS:** Secretary?

**Trish BURROWS:** Thanks for the question. Just in the way that you have asked the question, I can see that you understand the complexity of what is trying to be managed. The funding is available for 2.5 electorate officers. There is no funding that is provided to the employer for the purposes of employing any further electorate officers. So those 2.5 FTE, I should say, rather than 2.5 people – which sometimes can be four people, sometimes can be three people – is where there is permanent ongoing employment or fixed term. It really depends on what the member is looking for in relation to those 2.5. The employer, being jointly the Presiding Officers, have no funds to employ any further electorate officers. That decision to expend funds or provide funds for the purpose of employment belongs to the member because those funds come out of their electorate office and communications budget. So when it comes to that compliance question you asked, as I understand it, the compliance to offer ongoing or more secure employment, to use more industrial language, needs to be linked to there being an employer having ongoing need for and funding for those roles, which we do not have past 2.5.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Okay. I appreciate that response. Just to follow on, I understand currently certain national employment standards would stipulate that casual workers who have been employed for at least six months can notify their employer in writing of their intention to change to permanent employment, and an employer can only refuse the notice for certain reasons. So if a long-term casual worker like those I have mentioned provided written notice to the Parliament of Victoria that they intended to change to permanent employment in line with those standards, would Parliament accept it, and if not, what would be the reasons provided?

**Trish BURROWS:** I would like to take the question notice rather than speak off the cuff. It does link back to some of those exceptions that exist in relation to the employer's need to employ those people, but I would prefer to come back on notice and give you a fuller answer, if that is okay.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** That is all right. Thank you. On another matter, can I ask: when do you expect negotiations to begin for the electorate officer enterprise bargaining agreement?

**Trish BURROWS:** Good-faith negotiations have commenced with the union before the notice has been issued. We are still waiting for permission to issue the NERR, but we have commenced discussions with the union and shared logs of claim to try to work out exactly what might be in dispute. Of course independent bargaining reps may have different views, so we really need to get the whole cohort of electorate officers on board, but we have started to sort through those issues. As soon as we get permission to issue the NERR, that will be out and we will get underway in force.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Okay. Are there any commitments that you are able to make relating to back pay of salary increases or capability payments once the agreement is finalised?

**Trish BURROWS:** I cannot make a commitment now. What I can say is more a factual matter, which is that in having negotiations under any enterprise agreement that links to the state, the state wages policy is the basis of those discussions.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Okay. Thank you. On another matter, can I ask why external catering companies are unable to provide catering to events held at the Parliament, particularly cultural celebrations that have specific cultural foods best prepared by catering companies that have that specific expertise and knowledge of those foods? Can I ask why that is unable to happen?

**Maree EDWARDS:** I think they can. I do not think there is any reason why they cannot, as long as they meet health and safety requirements. We have had cultural groups come in that have brought their own food for those events, whether it is from an external catering company that they have used, but they have been able to bring in their own cultural food for those events. The only thing we do not like is for them to store the food in our storage facilities, because our kitchens need to be able to keep functioning for members and staff here. So I think that is not actually the case.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** I raise it just because I am aware there have been events where this has not been permitted.

**Maree EDWARDS:** It may be because of the storage issue and the risk regarding health and safety, like food handling certificates and all of those things. Trish, did you want to add to that?

**Trish BURROWS:** We do tend to not have external caterers come in. The Speaker and you are right – the service is provided in-house. The catering team do a great job when people have special requirements or they have to respond to cultural needs – as well as dietary needs, putting that to one side. The current practice is that the catering team provides catering within Parliament House. There are some circumstances where external catering can be used. To further what the Speaker was saying, if there was a particular occasion and we could deal with the food handling requirements that are there and service and all of those aspects which we have the responsibility for, then I am sure we could have those further discussions. But in general, no, external caterers are not usually used for events.

**Maree EDWARDS:** I think Mr Galea could answer that question, because we have a French event next week with French food. There you go.

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

**Meng Heang TAK:** Thank you, Chair. Speaker, President and Secretary, before I go to my question I would just like to pass on my acknowledgement and thanks to the catering team upstairs at Sessions. I can see that there are now steamed dim sims upstairs, so thank you very much.

**Shaun LEANE:** There was a special request for that.

**Meng Heang TAK:** Thank you.

**Maree EDWARDS:** And Speaker's chips.

**Meng Heang TAK:** Speaker's chips. Thank you. President, the 'Department Performance Statement' on page 165 outlines a focus on First Nations people. Could you outline for the committee what work the Parliament has done to achieve that and whether there are any examples or plans over the forward estimates that will support Parliament in achieving that focus?

**Shaun LEANE:** I give a lot of credit to the reconciliation plan committee of the Parliament departments. It is a cross-department committee across four departments that did all the work on producing the RAP and now the implementation. They are not small things; they are actually important things. Just to have an acknowledgement of the traditional owners of the land we are meeting on now out on the concourse and have something in the entrance has probably been a long time coming, and it is important work. I suppose it is an area where we have got to tread lightly, as in we have got to understand and I think we all understand that for First Nations people this building may represent something different than it does to us. I think we would like to do a lot more. But we have to respect the people that represent the First Nations groups right across the state insofar as we have to make sure they are happy with what we go forward with, and it is a process which we have to take time with. I am a bit sick of the Knight Kerr room – a couple of old dead dudes, apparently architects or something. Wouldn't it be great to call it the William Barak room? Wouldn't that be fantastic? We could do that tomorrow and put a plaque up, but that is not the way we should go about it. We have to deal with the Wurundjeri people – we have to deal with all the First Nations people – and make sure that they give us the green light to do things like that. As I said, it is a really good question, because it is an area where we have to be conscious of the thoughts and feelings of our First Nations people. I do not know if you want to add anything, Maree.

**Maree EDWARDS:** Only in the sense that there have been conversations had around this place for a very long time about a First Nations room. It is problematic in a building that represents colonial history, that is not encompassing of our First Nations history. We are very mindful that this building is often representative of some very difficult historical situations, so how we step forward with this is done, as the President rightly said, very carefully and very gently and always with First Nations people leading that conversation.

**Meng Heang TAK:** Thank you, President and Speaker. Community outreach is a huge part of that work and goes to your presentation, Speaker. Could you detail for the committee what Parliament does and an example that includes students, schools or specifically regional Victoria?

**Maree EDWARDS:** Thank you. It is something that this Parliament does very, very well. I had the federal Speaker here last week, who came specifically to talk about our community education program, because he was very interested in the way that we do it here. We do it very well given that we have a very small staff – Bridget – of outreach people who do that work; I think there are only 11. They are incredible. I had the privilege of attending, with them, a number of schools in my own electorate while they did the role-play of a Parliament within the classrooms. They are just so good, and the students love it. I was most excited by the fact that most of those students wanted to be the Speaker. Look, the outreach is great. We got to 40 schools, I believe, in different parts of Victoria, but we also do the metropolitan outreach; every non-sitting week there is outreach into the metropolitan schools. Then there are also the schools that come into the Parliament and then there are the online incursions as well. We are getting out to as many students and schools as possible. Then there is the teacher training, too, in democracy and civics, which I think is a really important part of all of that. We have our Youth Parliament; we have our parliamentary prize, which has just opened, so we are encouraging all students across Victoria to have a look at the parliamentary prize and participate. It is extremely popular.

I think we are punching above our weight. There is always more that we can do I think, and I am always thinking about 'How we can reach more students?' One of the things that I have been very conscious of since I became Speaker is that we need to educate young people about democracy and the democratic process, because



democracies across the world are at risk. If we do not get in and start teaching our young people now, then we risk losing that respect for our democracy and our democratic process and what this Parliament stands for and the work that is done in this Parliament. So a big shout-out to our community engagement team, because they are brilliant. They do a wonderful job.

**Meng Heang TAK:** Thank you, Speaker.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr Tak. Speaker, President, officials and clerks, thank you very much for taking the time to appear before the committee this afternoon.

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.

I would like to thank all ministers and officials who have given evidence to the committee today, as well as Hansard, the committee secretariat and parliamentary attendants. I would also like to thank the hospitality, security and cleaning staff who have continued to look after all of us today.

This does bring an end to the public hearings component for the 2025–26 budget estimates. I declare this hearing adjourned.

**Committee adjourned.**