



Hansard

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

60th Parliament

Wednesday 1 November 2023

Office-holders of the Legislative Assembly

60th Parliament

Speaker

Maree Edwards

Deputy Speaker

Matt Fregon

Acting Speakers

Juliana Addison, Christine Couzens, Jordan Crugnale, Paul Edbrooke, Wayne Farnham, Bronwyn Halfpenny, Paul Hamer, Michaela Settle, Meng Heang Tak and Jackson Taylor

Leader of the Parliamentary Labor Party and Premier

Jacinta Allan

Deputy Leader of the Parliamentary Labor Party and Deputy Premier

Ben Carroll

Leader of the Parliamentary Liberal Party and Leader of the Opposition

John Pesutto

Deputy Leader of the Parliamentary Liberal Party and Deputy Leader of the Opposition

David Southwick

Leader of the Nationals

Peter Walsh

Deputy Leader of the Nationals

Emma Kealy

Leader of the House

Mary-Anne Thomas

Manager of Opposition Business

James Newbury

**Members of the Legislative Assembly
60th Parliament**

Member	District	Party	Member	District	Party
Addison, Juliana	Wendouree	ALP	Lambert, Nathan	Preston	ALP
Allan, Jacinta	Bendigo East	ALP	Maas, Gary	Narre Warren South	ALP
Andrews, Daniel ²	Mulgrave	ALP	McCurdy, Tim	Ovens Valley	Nat
Battin, Brad	Berwick	Lib	McGhie, Steve	Melton	ALP
Benham, Jade	Mildura	Nat	McLeish, Cindy	Eildon	Lib
Britnell, Roma	South-West Coast	Lib	Marchant, Alison	Bellarine	ALP
Brooks, Colin	Bundoora	ALP	Matthews-Ward, Kathleen	Broadmeadows	ALP
Bull, Josh	Sunbury	ALP	Mercurio, Paul	Hastings	ALP
Bull, Tim	Gippsland East	Nat	Mullahy, John	Glen Waverley	ALP
Cameron, Martin	Morwell	Nat	Newbury, James	Brighton	Lib
Carbines, Anthony	Ivanhoe	ALP	O'Brien, Danny	Gippsland South	Nat
Carroll, Ben	Niddrie	ALP	O'Brien, Michael	Malvern	Lib
Cheeseman, Darren	South Barwon	ALP	O'Keefe, Kim	Shepparton	Nat
Cianflone, Anthony	Pascoe Vale	ALP	Pallas, Tim	Werribee	ALP
Cleland, Annabelle	Euroa	Nat	Pearson, Danny	Essendon	ALP
Connolly, Sarah	Laverton	ALP	Pesutto, John	Hawthorn	Lib
Couzens, Christine	Geelong	ALP	Read, Tim	Brunswick	Greens
Crewther, Chris	Mornington	Lib	Richards, Pauline	Cranbourne	ALP
Crugnale, Jordan	Bass	ALP	Richardson, Tim	Mordialloc	ALP
D'Ambrosio, Liliana	Mill Park	ALP	Riordan, Richard	Polwarth	Lib
De Martino, Daniela	Monbulk	ALP	Rowswell, Brad	Sandringham	Lib
de Vietri, Gabrielle	Richmond	Greens	Sandell, Ellen	Melbourne	Greens
Dimopoulos, Steve	Oakleigh	ALP	Settle, Michaela	Eureka	ALP
Edbrooke, Paul	Frankston	ALP	Smith, Ryan ³	Warrandyte	Lib
Edwards, Maree	Bendigo West	ALP	Southwick, David	Caulfield	Lib
Fowles, Will ¹	Ringwood	Ind	Spence, Ros	Kalkallo	ALP
Fregon, Matt	Ashwood	ALP	Staikos, Nick	Bentleigh	ALP
George, Ella	Lara	ALP	Suleyman, Natalie	St Albans	ALP
Grigorovitch, Luba	Kororoit	ALP	Tak, Meng Heang	Clarinda	ALP
Groth, Sam	Nepean	Lib	Taylor, Jackson	Bayswater	ALP
Guy, Matthew	Bulleen	Lib	Taylor, Nina	Albert Park	ALP
Halfpenny, Bronwyn	Thomastown	ALP	Theophanous, Kat	Northcote	ALP
Hall, Katie	Footscray	ALP	Thomas, Mary-Anne	Macedon	ALP
Hamer, Paul	Box Hill	ALP	Tilley, Bill	Benambra	Lib
Haylett, Martha	Ripon	ALP	Vallence, Bridget	Evelyn	Lib
Hibbins, Sam	Prahran	Greens	Vulin, Emma	Pakenham	ALP
Hilakari, Mathew	Point Cook	ALP	Walsh, Peter	Murray Plains	Nat
Hodgett, David	Croydon	Lib	Walters, Iwan	Greenvale	ALP
Home, Melissa	Williamstown	ALP	Ward, Vicki	Eltham	ALP
Hutchins, Natalie	Sydenham	ALP	Wells, Kim	Rowville	Lib
Kathage, Lauren	Yan Yean	ALP	Werner, Nicole ⁴	Warrandyte	Lib
Kealy, Emma	Lowan	Nat	Wight, Dylan	Tarneit	ALP
Kilkenny, Sonya	Carrum	ALP	Williams, Gabrielle	Dandenong	ALP
Wayne Farnham	Narracan	Lib	Wilson, Belinda	Narre Warren North	ALP
			Wilson, Jess	Kew	Lib

¹ ALP until 5 August 2023

² Resigned 27 September 2023

³ Resigned 7 July 2023

⁴ Elected 3 October 2023

PARTY ABBREVIATIONS

ALP – Australian Labor Party, Greens – Australian Greens,
Ind – Independent, Lib – Liberal Party of Australia, Nat – National Party of Australia

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Wednesday 1 November 2023

The SPEAKER (Maree Edwards) took the chair at 9:33 am, read the prayer and made an acknowledgement of country.

Bills**Biosecurity Legislation Amendment (Incident Response) Bill 2023***Introduction and first reading*

Ros SPENCE (Kalkallo – Minister for Agriculture, Minister for Community Sport, Minister for Carers and Volunteers) (09:34): I move:

That I introduce a bill for an act to amend the Livestock Disease Control Act 1994, the Plant Biosecurity Act 2010 and the Livestock Management Act 2010 and for other purposes.

Motion agreed to.

Emma KEALY (Lowan) (09:34): I ask the minister for a brief explanation of the bill.

Ros SPENCE (Kalkallo – Minister for Agriculture, Minister for Community Sport, Minister for Carers and Volunteers) (09:34): The bill makes amendments to the acts that I have mentioned to strengthen emergency management, traceability and enforcement provisions. The bill strengthens Victoria's capability to manage biosecurity risks, including preparing for, responding to and recovering from the detection or outbreak of an exotic animal disease, plant disease or pest. The bill also supports a public commitment made by the Victorian government to improving exotic disease preparedness and response capability. The bill ensures a holistic and effective legislative framework for exotic pests and diseases to protect Victoria's valuable agricultural and horticultural sectors. This will mitigate the potential risk of market access and trade disruptions associated with a detection or outbreak.

Read first time.

Ordered to be read second time tomorrow.

Corrections Amendment (Parole Reform) Bill 2023*Introduction and first reading*

Anthony CARBINES (Ivanhoe – Minister for Police, Minister for Crime Prevention, Minister for Racing) (09:35): I move:

That I introduce a bill for an act to amend the Corrections Act 1986 in relation to parole and for other purposes.

Motion agreed to.

Brad BATTIN (Berwick) (09:36): I ask for a brief explanation of the bill.

Anthony CARBINES (Ivanhoe – Minister for Police, Minister for Crime Prevention, Minister for Racing) (09:36): The bill will deliver the government's commitment to introduce legislation to provide greater certainty for victims of serious crimes, to minimise trauma associated with the parole process and to protect the community from the risk posed by Paul Denyer.

Read first time.

Ordered to be read second time tomorrow.

Business of the house**Notices of motion**

The SPEAKER (09:37): General business, notice of motion 10, will be removed from the notice paper unless members wishing their notice to remain advise the Clerk in writing before 5 pm today.

*Documents***Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action***Sustainability Fund Activities Report*

Mary-Anne THOMAS (Macedon – Leader of the House, Minister for Health, Minister for Health Infrastructure, Minister for Ambulance Services) (09:37): I table, by leave, the activities report 2022–23 of the Sustainability Fund.

Visit Victoria*Report 2022–23*

Mary-Anne THOMAS (Macedon – Leader of the House, Minister for Health, Minister for Health Infrastructure, Minister for Ambulance Services) (09:37): I table, by leave, the report 2022–23 of Visit Victoria.

Judicial College of Victoria*Report 2022–23*

Anthony CARBINES (Ivanhoe – Minister for Police, Minister for Crime Prevention, Minister for Racing) (09:38): I table, by leave, the report 2022–23 of the Judicial College of Victoria.

Victoria Law Foundation*Report 2022–23*

Anthony CARBINES (Ivanhoe – Minister for Police, Minister for Crime Prevention, Minister for Racing) (09:38): I table, by leave, the report 2022–23 of the Victoria Law Foundation.

Victorian Veterans Council*Report 2022–23*

Natalie SULEYMAN (St Albans – Minister for Veterans, Minister for Small Business, Minister for Youth) (09:38): I table, by leave, the report 2022–23 of the Victorian Veterans Council.

Parliamentary departments*Reports 2022–23*

Matt FREGON (Ashwood) (09:39): I table, by leave, the reports 2022–23 of the Department of the Legislative Assembly and the Department of Parliamentary Services.

Parliamentary Budget Office*Report 2022–23*

Sarah CONNOLLY (Laverton) (09:39): I have the honour to present to the house the Parliamentary Budget Office report 2022–23 under section 28 of the Parliamentary Budget Officer Act 2017.

Documents**Incorporated list as follows:**

DOCUMENT TABLED BY COMMAND OF THE GOVERNOR – The Clerk announced that the following document had been lodged for presentation by Command of the Governor:

Magistrates' Court of Victoria – Report 2022–23.

Ordered to be tabled.

DOCUMENTS TABLED UNDER ACTS OF PARLIAMENT – The Clerk tabled:

Accident Compensation Conciliation Service – Report 2022–23

Adult, Community and Further Education Board – Report 2022–23

Adult Parole Board – Report 2022–23

Agriculture Victoria Services Pty Ltd – Report 2022–23

Alexandra District Health – Report 2022–23

Alfred Health – Report 2022–23

Alpine Health – Report 2022–23

AMES Australia – Report 2022–23

Asset Confiscation Operations – Report 2022–23

Assisted Reproductive Treatment Act 2008 – Victorian Assisted Reproductive Treatment Authority – Report 2022–23

Auditor-General – Domestic Building Oversight Part 1: Regulation – Ordered to be published

Austin Health – Report 2022–23

Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI) – Report 2022–23

Australian Criminal Intelligence Commission:
Report 2022–23 under s 42BI of the *Evidence (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1958*
Report 2022–23 under s 30L of the *Surveillance Devices Act 1999*

Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (Ahpra) – Report 2022–23

Bairnsdale Regional Health Service – Report 2022–23

Ballarat General Cemeteries Trust – Report 2022–23

Barwon Health – Report 2022–23

Barwon Region Water Corporation – Report 2022–23

Bass Coast Health – Report 2022–23

Beaufort and Skipton Health Service – Report 2022–23

Beechworth Health Service – Report 2022–23

Benalla Health – Report 2022–23

Bendigo Health – Report 2022–23

Boort District Health – Report 2022–23

Breakthrough Victoria Pty Ltd – Report 2022–23

Calvary Health Care Bethlehem Ltd – Report 2022–23

Casterton Memorial Hospital – Report 2022–23

Cenitex – Report 2022–23

Central Gippsland Region Water Corporation – Report 2022–23

Central Highlands Region Water Corporation – Report 2022–23

Central Highlands Rural Health – Report 2022–23

Cohuna District Hospital – Report 2022–23

Colac Area Health – Report 2022–23

Coliban Region Water – Report 2022–23

Commission for Children and Young People – Report 2022–23 – Ordered to be published

Consumer Affairs Victoria – Report 2022–23 – Ordered to be published

Corangamite Catchment Management Authority – Report 2022–23

Coroners Court of Victoria – Report 2022–23

Coronial Council of Victoria – Report 2022–23

Corryong Health – Report 2022–23

Court Services Victoria – Report 2022–23

Dairy Food Safety Victoria – Report 2022–23

Dental Health Services Victoria – Report 2022–23
Development Victoria – Report 2022–23
Dhelkaya Health – Report 2022–23
Disability Services Commissioner – Report 2022–23
Docklands Studio Melbourne Pty Ltd – Report 2022–23
East Gippsland Catchment Management Authority – Report 2022–23
East Gippsland Region Water Corporation – Report 2022–23
East Grampians Health Service – Report 2022–23
East Wimmera Health Service – Report 2022–23
Eastern Health – Report 2022–23
Echuca Regional Health – Report 2022–23
Education, Department of – Report 2022–23
Emergency Services Superannuation Board – Report 2022–23
Emergency Services Telecommunications Authority – Report 2022–23
Energy, Environment and Climate Action, Department of:
 Report 2022–23
 Report 2022–23 under s 30L of the *Surveillance Devices Act 1999*
Energy Safe Victoria – Report 2022–23
Environment Protection Authority – Report 2022–23 under s 30L of the *Surveillance Devices Act 1999*
Essential Services Commission – Report 2022–23
Families, Fairness and Housing, Department of – Report 2022–23
Film Victoria – Report 2022–23
Financial Management Act 1994:
 Explanation from the Assistant Treasurer for the delay of the reports 2022–23 of:
 Albury Wodonga Health
 Ambulance Services Victoria
 Architect Registration Board of Victoria
 Australian Grand Prix Corporation
 Central Gippsland Health Service
 Cladding Safety Victoria
 Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability
 Country Fire Authority
 Fire Rescue Victoria
 Fire Services Implementation Monitor
 Gippsland Southern Health Service
 Great Ocean Road Coast and Parks Authority
 Great Ocean Road Health
 Harness Racing Victoria
 Heritage Council
 Kerang District Health
 Mental Health Complaints Commissioner
 Northeast Health Wangaratta
 Omeo District Health
 Portland District Health
 Remembrance Parks Central Victoria

Robinvale District Health Service
Rural Northwest Health
State Electricity Commission
Surveyors Registration Board of Victoria
Swan Hill District Health
Trust for Nature
VicForests
Victorian Aboriginal Heritage Council
Victorian Building Authority
Victorian Collaborative Centre
Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority
Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission
Victorian Fisheries Authority
Victorian Institute of Forensic Medicine
Victorian Institute of Forensic Mental Health
Victorian Legal Services Board
Victorian Planning Authority
Victorian Professional Standards Council
Victorian Responsible Gambling Foundation

Reports from the Minister for Agriculture that she had received the Reports 2022–23 of the:

Murray Valley Wine Grape Industry Development Committee
Phytogene Pty Ltd
Veterinary Practitioners Registration Board of Victoria
Victorian Strawberry Industry Development Committee

Reports from the Minister for Health that she had received the Reports 2022–23 of the:

Mildura Cemeteries Trust
Victorian Assisted Reproductive Treatment Authority
Victorian Pharmacy Authority

Report from the Minister for Veterans that she had received the Report 2022–23 of the Victorian Veterans Council

Forensic Leave Panel – Report 2022

Game Management Authority:

Report 2022–23

Report 2022–23 under s 30L of the *Surveillance Devices Act 1999*

Geelong Cemeteries Trust – Report 2022–23

Geelong Performing Arts Centre Trust – Report 2022–23

Geoffrey Gardiner Dairy Foundation – Report 2022–23

Gippsland and Southern Rural Water Corporation – Report 2022–23

Glenelg Hopkins Catchment Management Authority – Report 2022–23

Goulburn Broken Catchment Management Authority – Report 2022–23

Goulburn-Murray Rural Water Corporation – Report 2022–23

Goulburn Valley Health – Report 2022–23

Goulburn Valley Region Water Corporation – Report 2022–23

Government Services, Department of – Report 2022–23

Grampians Health – Report 2022–23

Grampians Wimmera Mallee Water Corporation – Report 2022–23
Greater Metropolitan Cemeteries Trust – Report 2022–23
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Greyhound Racing Victoria – Report 2022–23
Health, Department of – Report 2022–23
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Inglewood and District Health Service – Report 2022–23
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Judicial Commission of Victoria – Report 2022–23
Justice and Community Safety, Department of – Report 2022–23
Kardinia Park Stadium Trust – Report 2022–23
Kilmore District Health – Report 2022–23
Kooweerup Regional Health Service – Report 2022–23
Kyabram District Health Service – Report 2022–23
Labour Hire Licensing Authority – Report 2022–23
Latrobe Regional Health – Report 2022–23
Legal Practitioners’ Liability Committee – Report 2022–23
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Library Board of Victoria – Report 2022–23
Lower Murray Urban and Rural Water Corporation – Report 2022–23
Mallee Catchment Management Authority – Report 2022–23
Mallee Track Health and Community Service – Report 2022–23
Mansfield District Hospital – Report 2022–23
Maryborough District Health Service – Report 2022–23
Melbourne Arts Precinct Corporation – Report 2022–23
Melbourne and Olympic Parks Trust – Report 2022–23
Melbourne Convention and Exhibition Trust – Report 2022–23
Melbourne Health – Report 2022–23
Melbourne Market Authority – Report 2022–23
Melbourne Port Lessor Pty Ltd – Report 2022–23
Melbourne Recital Centre – Report 2022–23
Melbourne Water Corporation – Report 2022–23
Members of Parliament (Standards) Act 1978 – Register of Interests – Return submitted by a member of the Legislative Assembly – Primary return 30 October 2023 – Ordered to be published
Mercy Hospitals Victoria Ltd – Report 2022–23
Mildura Base Public Hospital – Report 2022–23
Monash Health – Report 2022–23
Moyne Health Services – Report 2022–23
Murray-Darling Basin Authority – Report 2022–23
Museums Board of Victoria – Report 2022–23
National Gallery of Victoria – Report 2022–23

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National Health Practitioner Ombudsman – Report 2022–23
National Rail Safety Regulator, Office of – Report 2022–23
NCN Health – Report 2022–23
North Central Catchment Management Authority – Report 2022–23
North East Catchment Management Authority – Report 2022–23
North East Link State Tolling Corporation – Report 2022–23
North East Region Water Corporation – Report 2022–23
Northern Health – Report 2022–23
Orbost Regional Health – Report 2022–23
Parks Victoria – Report 2022–23
Peninsula Health – Report 2022–23
Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre – Report 2022–23
Police Registration and Services Board – Report 2022–23
Port of Hastings Corporation – Report 2022–23
Ports Victoria – Report 2022–23
Post Sentence Authority – Report 2022–23
Premier and Cabinet, Department of – Report 2022–23
PrimeSafe – Report 2022–23
Public Advocate, Office of – Report 2022–23 – Ordered to be published
Public Interest Monitor – Report 2022–23
Public Record Office – Report 2022–23
Queen Elizabeth Centre – Report 2022–23
Racing Integrity Commissioner – Report 2022–23
Radiation Advisory Committee – Report 2022–23
Respect Victoria – Report 2022–23
Road Safety Camera Commissioner – Report 2022–23
Rochester and Elmore District Health Service – Report 2022–23
Rolling Stock Holdings (Victoria) Pty Ltd – Report 2022–23
Rolling Stock (Victoria-VL) Pty Ltd – Report 2022–23
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Royal Children’s Hospital – Report 2022–23
Royal Victorian Eye and Ear Hospital – Report 2022-23
Royal Women’s Hospital – Report 2022-23
Safe Transport Victoria – Report 2022–23
Serious Offenders Act 2018 – Review of the Act
Seymour Health – Report 2022–23
Shrine of Remembrance Trustees – Report 2022–23
South East Water Corporation – Report 2022–23
South Gippsland Hospital – Report 2022–23
South Gippsland Region Water Corporation – Report 2022–23
South West Healthcare – Report 2022–23

Southern Metropolitan Cemeteries Trust – Report 2022–23
St Vincent’s Hospital (Melbourne) Ltd – Report 2022–23
State Sport Centres Trust – Report 2022–23
State Trustees Ltd – Report 2022–23
Suburban Rail Loop Authority – Report 2022–23
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Terang and Mortlake Health Service – Report 2022–23
Timboon and District Healthcare Service – Report 2022–23
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 Report 2022–23 under s 30L of the *Surveillance Devices Act 1999*
 Report 2022–23 under s 20R of the *Witness Protection Act 1991*
Victoria State Emergency Service Authority – Report 2022–23
Victorian Academy of Teaching and Leadership – Report 1 January 2022 to 30 June 2023
Victorian Arts Centre Trust – Report 2022–23
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Victorian Disability Worker Commission and Disability Worker Registration Board of Victoria –
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Victorian Funds Management Corporation – Report 2022–23
Victorian Gambling and Casino Control Commission – Report 2022–23
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Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (VicHealth) – Report 2022–23
Victorian Institute of Sport Ltd – Report 2022–23
Victorian Institute of Teaching – Report 2022–23
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Victorian Rail Track (VicTrack) – Report 2022–23
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Bills

Gambling Legislation Amendment Bill 2023

Council's agreement

The SPEAKER (09:41): I have received a message from the Legislative Council agreeing to the Gambling Legislation Amendment Bill 2023 without amendment.

Motions

Government performance

James NEWBURY (Brighton) (09:41): I desire to move, by leave:

That the Premier takes responsibility for the government's policy chaos, over the last week alone, including delaying Denyer laws, a new growth tax, health tax chaos, palliative care cuts, scrapping mental health from WorkCover, hospital stay cuts and the container deposit scheme mess.

Leave refused.

Members statements

Republic of Türkiye centenary

Natalie SULEYMAN (St Albans – Minister for Veterans, Minister for Small Business, Minister for Youth) (09:42): Melbourne was lit up in red and white on Sunday 29 October to mark the centenary of the Republic of Türkiye. One hundred years ago the world's greatest leader Mustafa Kemal Atatürk declared and founded the Republic of Türkiye. Atatürk's modern principles of reform, progress and unity live on.

Victoria and Türkiye have a very special bond – a bond that began in the battlefields of Gallipoli and continues today. We stood side by side with Türkiye through the devastating earthquakes. We funded the official centenary celebrations together with the Turkish community, and I am very proud to have established the first Parliamentary Friends of Türkiye group in the Parliament. And this year we reintroduced the Premier's Spirit of Anzac Prize, taking students on a journey to Gallipoli and Türkiye.

Victoria's strong Turkish community really has made their mark. Whether it is in business, sports, politics, media, radio, trade or investment, they have contributed to many, many sectors. I want to thank the Consul General Doğan Işık, the ambassador Ufuk Gezer and all members of the Turkish community for celebrating the 100th anniversary of Türkiye. As Mustafa Kemal Atatürk said:

We established the republic. You are the ones who will raise it and keep it alive.
Cumhuriyet Bayraminiz kutlu olsun.

Mansfield Musical and Dramatic Society

Cindy McLEISH (Eildon) (09:43): Mansfield Musical and Dramatic Society's (MMUDS) production of *The Castle 2* was a hit, with all 10 performances sold out. That is around 2500 people who got to see the sequel to the original movie as a musical. Written and directed by local GP and obstetrician Will Twycross, the show centres on the Kerrigans' move from Coolaroo – after their land is compulsorily acquired by the Very Fast Train Corporation – to living in Bonnie Doon. With songs and lyrics given a test run by Will and his friends, the production did not disappoint. For some added excitement, Michael Caton drove from Sydney to see the show and the next day went to Bonnie Doon with the cast and crew to see the holiday house. He was amazed a sequel had been written.

MMUDS is incredibly inclusive. This year Afghani refugee Halima Rezayee and her daughters Zainab and Susan were part of the cast, which helped them to develop their language skills. Congratulations to the 150 people – committee, cast and crew – for their passion and effort in bringing this show to life.

Sacred Heart Primary School, Yea

Cindy McLEISH (Eildon) (09:44): Congratulations are in order for Sacred Heart Primary School in Yea, who celebrated their centenary year with celebrations on Sunday. Nick Frederiksen and his staff, together with parents and students, put on a great turn. Special mention to Ivy Leatham, Ruby McKay, Grace Lanigan and John Reid, who took on key speaking roles. The school welcomed past students and principals to help commemorate the occasion, with a new paved path being unveiled. The event showcased the school's history through a mix of stories, photographs and displays and included the unveiling of their centennial brick path.

Fruit2Work

Belinda WILSON (Narre Warren North) (09:45): Last week I joined the wonderful member for Laverton, who invited me to journey across the west to a very special organisation. Fruit2Work does incredible work, delivering fruit, milk, tea and coffee to customers around Melbourne, Geelong and Ballarat, but they also make a difference as a not-for-profit social enterprise and charity, offering meaningful employment opportunities for people who have been impacted by the justice system, often working with people who have been in prison or who have a criminal record. The organisation prioritises creating chances for their team to gain important skills and experience to reset their lives and return to society as contributing members. The Fruit2Work program focuses on squashing the chances of reoffending. Their commitment to transitional employment has proven to be very special in getting their employees' lives back on track.

We had a wonderful tour of the facility at Laverton, and we were also joined by the Minister for Youth Justice in the other place. It was really great to meet Rob, Simon and Linda to hear their incredible stories and hear how the business has grown over the past couple of years. The exciting thing is, though, that they are coming to my patch in Hallam. I cannot wait to work with Fruit2Work over in my patch and see how they will make a difference in the south-east, just like they have done in the west. Thank you so much to the member for Laverton for inviting me out to see this amazing organisation at work.

Horseracing

Tim BULL (Gippsland East) (09:46): I want to speak for a few moments about something fantastic that is happening right at this current time, and that is the Spring Racing Carnival in Melbourne. Having attended the Caulfield Cup a little over a week ago and the Cox Plate on Saturday, we saw international racing at its very, very best. We have got Flemington just around the corner, and I know some of the members sitting just behind me will be supporting this fantastic industry there. We also have country racing at its very best; the Moe Cup Friday a week ago and Sale on Sunday were

absolutely fantastic meetings. And even today we have got the running of the group 3 Bendigo Cup, and I certainly hope Interpretation can get over the line there and qualify for the Melbourne Cup.

But of course not all in this chamber support the racing industry. There is a quartet that sits up the back there in bay 13 who want racing banned. I should not actually call it bay 13, because people who go to bay 13 like to have fun, but these guys do not like racing. They do not like fishing, hunting or rodeos. All the things we like in the bush they do not like.

I am pleased to see the relatively new Minister for Racing has been out to a lot of the meetings. I do not think he would have been to a meeting before he got the portfolio, but it is great to see him embracing the industry. All of us in this chamber need to be steadfast in our support of racing. It is a great industry that goes back 200 years, and we should be behind it.

Parole reform

Paul EDBROOKE (Frankston) (09:48): Today the Labor Allan government introduced legislation into the Victorian Parliament that will keep Frankston serial killer Paul Denyer behind bars for good, never to walk our streets ever again. As a secondary measure this legislation will also give the independent Adult Parole Board of Victoria the power to restrict repeat applications for parole in cases where very serious offenders do not meet the threshold required. We are talking about introducing a safeguard against very serious offenders such as multiple murderers, murderer-rapists and child murderers.

I have got to know the Russell family very well, and I believe one of the most important factors in drafting this legislation was the voice of the victims' families, who told us about 30 years of lived experience and what they wanted. This eventually resulted in the family giving this legislation their blessing. I think this approach should be used far more often. Our legal system is better when lawmakers like the Attorney-General sit face to face with victims' families over the kitchen table and listen. I thank the Attorney-General for visiting the Russell family home with me on multiple occasions. With such serious consequences for our community, the preparation of this legislation was too important to rush. Consultation with the community and victims' families has taken time, but we have ensured these new laws reflect community expectations.

I want to extend my love and thanks to my friends the Russell family – Brian, Carmel, Karen, Lisa and Jeanine – for their enduring patience and advice. This legislation honours both the strong advocacy of victims' families and the legacies of Natalie Russell, Elizabeth Stevens and Debbie Fream by ensuring people who belong in prison stay in prison.

World Teachers Day

Jess WILSON (Kew) (09:49): I rise to mark World Teachers Day and thank teachers across Victoria for the commitment and skill they demonstrate in educating our students. Teachers leave a lasting impression on our hearts, encourage us to ask questions and help to shape our futures. I, like many in this place, have been blessed to have many inspirational teachers in my life – my prep teacher Wendy Mackie at Mont Albert Primary and Andree Buchanan, my high school history teacher at Strathcona. These teachers encouraged me to see learning as a lifelong pursuit. In particular I would like to thank my year 12 English teacher Gabbi Young. Mrs Young taught me to always be inquisitive and above all else about a true sense of integrity. Thank you to all our teachers who make a profound impact on young Victorians' lives every day. Their legacy is not just the lessons they teach but the lives that they touch.

On the same note can I wish all the year 12 students luck as they continue to sit their exams – a very stressful time for sure but also an exciting one as the next chapter begins.

Centonove and Enoteca Boccaccio

Jess WILSON (Kew) (09:50): Congratulations to two local Kew restaurants, Centonove in Kew and Enoteca Boccaccio in Balwyn, for being awarded one hat each in *The Age Good Food Guide* this year. Enoteca Boccaccio only opened a few months ago – an incredible achievement in such a short period of time. Congratulations to Jesse Davidson the owner of Centonove and to my good friend Anthony D’Anna and his family, the owners of Enoteca Boccaccio and the iconic Boccaccio family grocery and cellars downstairs. I know how much passion both Jesse and Anthony have for the authentic Italian food, and we are proud to have them in the electorate of Kew. I encourage everyone to get along and enjoy the great restaurants.

Geelong emergency services workers

Chris COUZENS (Geelong) (09:51): I want to express my gratitude and heartfelt appreciation to all first responders serving the Geelong community. Their unwavering commitment to and care for safeguarding our community is greatly appreciated. The recent events in Geelong, where tragically the lives of three children were lost, will undoubtedly leave a lasting impact. This impact extends through to all Geelong first responders, Fire Rescue Victoria, the police and paramedics and also resonates deeply throughout the broader Geelong community. I extend my condolences to the family, their loved ones and Geelong first responders who have been significantly impacted by these tragic events. These events underscore the ongoing commitment and the tremendous level of trauma our first responders endure in their relentless efforts to ensure the safety and wellbeing of all of us. Geelong first responders also came out in force with the recent aircraft crash involving our own member for Frankston and 17 others, thankfully with no serious injury or death. This is an example of the work our amazing first responders deal with every day.

Anam Cara House Geelong

Chris COUZENS (Geelong) (09:52): Last Friday was a momentous occasion as I had the great honour to be part of the official opening of Anam Cara House Geelong. This extraordinary facility is poised to play a vital role in offering support to families during their most challenging times. I want to acknowledge Diana Taylor, Bob Gartland and, importantly, the staff and volunteers and the board of directors and ambassadors for making this happen, located on Wathaurong country at Deakin University’s Waurn Ponds campus.

Renewable energy

Sam HIBBINS (Pahran) (09:52): We are in a climate crisis. Already we are experiencing record temperatures, mass extinction of our native flora, extreme weather events, devastating floods, mega bushfires and deadly heatwaves, and we are in store for another summer of severe heat. Coal and gas are the leading causes of climate change, yet we have got Labor and the Liberals supporting even more new brown coal projects here in Victoria – more coal and gas.

Danny O’Brien interjected.

The SPEAKER: Member for Gippsland South, you are not in your place.

Sam HIBBINS: Now we are seeing them throw their support behind new coal projects in the Latrobe Valley. This coal-to-hydrogen project would extend the life of Victoria’s coalmines and use discredited carbon capture and storage. This project will create emissions the equivalent of putting hundreds of thousands of polluting cars on the roads. I was recently joined by many constituents of mine who are passionate about stopping climate change and in support of the Greens parliamentary petition, against Labor’s new coal project, to keep coal in the ground where it belongs. There needs to be no more new fossil fuel projects and a fast transition out of coal and gas towards 100 per cent renewable energy. We have a generational responsibility to act.

The member for Gippsland East has left the chamber. I do not know whether he has gone home in the back of a divvy van, but can I say to the government: stop being on a unity ticket with the Nationals and start being on a unity ticket with people who care about animal welfare.

Pakenham electorate transport infrastructure

Emma VULIN (Pakenham) (09:54): There is never a dull moment in Pakenham. Last week I went to visit the tremendous progress on the new 60-metre bridge over the Monash Freeway on the Healesville-Koo Wee Rup Road. Two massive soil embankments have been completed, with the pair set to form the foundation of the new bridge over the Princes Freeway. Over 90,000 tonnes of soil have been piled up and left to settle over three months to give the best footing for this new bridge. It is now time to move on to the construction of the bridge itself, starting with the abutment on each side.

Last week I went on a tour with the Level Crossing Removal Project team to see the progress of the elevated rail and the new East Pakenham train station. The lift shafts have been installed, the new car park is looking amazing and we had 400 workers on this project alone in September.

Living & Learning Pakenham

Emma VULIN (Pakenham) (09:54): I celebrated alongside the team and families at Living & Learning in Pakenham for Children's Week 2023, where there was facepainting, games, activities and even an animal farm. I must say, the little pig was my favourite.

Navaratri celebrations

Emma VULIN (Pakenham) (09:55): I also attended the Navaratri celebrations, which are the celebrations of the goddess of strength and justice, with the Cardinia Gujarati Association and danced the night away.

Eden Foster

Emma VULIN (Pakenham) (09:55): Lastly, I showed my support for our Labor candidate for Mulgrave, the wonderful Eden Foster, an incredible woman who has already made such a fabulous contribution to her community as the mayor of Dandenong and who will continue to deliver for the people of Mulgrave if she is successful in the upcoming by-election. We wish Eden all the very best.

Trinity Brighton Uniting Church

James NEWBURY (Brighton) (09:55): On a hot February day in 1853 congregants of what has become Trinity Uniting first worshipped together in a tent in Carpenter Street, Brighton. This year the church celebrates its 170th anniversary. From a tent, then to a wooden chapel in Male Steet, the congregation finally bought a block of land in Black Street in 1858. The congregation have since met at the wonderful church building that was built in 1875. Congratulations to the Brighton Uniting family, including Vicar Kevin Kim, historian Merrowyn Deacon and church leadership Helen Wells and John Black on your commitment and service to our community.

Former Xavier College, Brighton, site

James NEWBURY (Brighton) (09:56): The Brighton community is deeply concerned about Labor's government-led approach to planning that strips away the rights of the community to have a say. The community around the former Xavier school Kostka site on South Road in Brighton are concerned about their rights and voices being taken away by Labor's new laws.

Brighton Bathing Box Association

James NEWBURY (Brighton) (09:56): The Brighton bathing boxes on Dendy Street Beach must be one of the most iconic attractions in Victoria. First formed in 1935, the Brighton Bathing Box Association represents 88 box owners and eight boatsheds – that is 90 per cent of the 104 sites. Thank you to the association for their work, especially president Andrew Monotti and former president John Rundell.

Bottarga

James NEWBURY (Brighton) (09:56): A big congratulations to Fredi, Somi and the Bottarga team in Martin Street, Brighton, who were recently awarded a hat by *The Age Good Food Guide*. The team work hard and the whole community is thrilled with their achievement.

Merinda Park Learning and Community Centre

Gary MAAS (Narre Warren South) (09:57): I recently had the pleasure of attending Merinda Park Learning and Community Centre's open day in Cranbourne North. The centre is a really important hub that offers childcare services, English courses, rooms for community meetings, and classes including computer skills, payroll systems, citizenship tests, and skills and competence for members in my community to get a job. It is a hub which encourages education and community involvement and is a welcoming and supportive place for many in our multicultural communities.

The open day brought families and the community together, and there was a real spirit of harmony and inclusion. The day was full of entertainment, including face painting and a petting zoo, and emergency services were there with various displays. And what would a day like this be without a sausage sizzle, of course? It provided an opportunity for local residents to connect and explore various ways to get involved in the community centre's activities and programs. Visitors met with staff and talked about volunteering and were provided with information on sessions offered by the centre, including adult education, youth activities and support services. The success of the open day has set the stage for people of all ages to take advantage of the various programs and initiatives offered by the centre. I would like to thank centre manager Michelle Davidson and her team. Thank you for inviting me to this terrific event. I will look forward to my future visits to Merinda Park Learning and Community Centre to see its growing program.

Motorsports

Jade BENHAM (Mildura) (09:58): What a weekend it has been for Mildura's motorsport champions. Josh Waters, post injury, took the win in the Australian superbikes at Phillip Island over the weekend. That will make the finale in December a tight battle for the championships. Two incredible races – congratulations, Josh. We'll see you at the bend. Then cousin Cam Waters had a weekend out on the Gold Coast, finishing third in the Gold Coast 500. And Toby Hederics in the Rallye du Maroc was the fastest rookie, which scores him fully paid entry into the Dakar Rally. It looks like I have got a new Toby to cheer for at Dakar this year. Best of luck. I will say it louder for those at the back: we put food on your plate and champions on race and rally tracks.

Pink Ball

Jade BENHAM (Mildura) (09:59): Congratulations to the committee of the Pink Ball in Mildura for their 14th annual ball, held recently. This year's ball raised a record \$60,000 for Sunraysia Cancer Resources. Congratulations and thank you. It was a great night. I would also like to acknowledge the work that Sunraysia Cancer Resources do.

Lleyton Pain

Jade BENHAM (Mildura) (09:59): Seventeen-year-old Mildura City goalkeeper Lleyton Pain is heading to the UK shortly to represent Australia at the Global Football Academy. Lleyton has played with Mildura City since he was six and has represented the Victorian squad on a regular basis. Wishing you all the very best in London, Lleyton.

Sam Smythe

Jade BENHAM (Mildura) (10:00): Congratulations to Sam Smythe on bronze at the Australian Special Olympics national golf tournament. (*Time expired*)

Middle East conflict

Dylan WIGHT (Tarneit) (10:00): As I rise, I stand with the Palestinian people and condemn the killing of innocent civilians and children in Gaza. As I do so, I also condemn the terrorist organisation Hamas for the atrocities that it has committed against the people of Israel. The crimes of Hamas, though, cannot justify the attacks that we are seeing against Palestinian civilians.

Tarneit is an electorate with a large Muslim and Arabic population. As a state Victoria is enriched by a strong and vibrant Islamic community. As a newly elected representative, I have found the local Islamic and Arabic community to be extraordinarily welcoming and kind. This has imparted to me an even deeper understanding of how important it is that we stand up and speak out against Islamophobia and discrimination in all of its forms. I acknowledge that many within the Arabic community in Victoria are being confronted with distressing images and stories coming out of Gaza. Their pain and anguish are palpable. They are witnessing devastation that impacts their family, their friends and their community. We can and we must condemn Islamophobia and antisemitism as it occurs both here and overseas. We must speak out against indiscriminate destruction of lives, of homes and of urban infrastructure. The international community and the Australian government must advocate for a ceasefire. We must show support to our Palestinian and Arabic communities in Victoria. We must reaffirm – (*Time expired*)

Kevin Johnson

Wayne FARNHAM (Narracan) (10:01): I want to shout out today to a local volunteer who was awarded the AFL merit award for his 51 years of service of the Ellinbank Football Club – Kevin Johnson, his name is. I got to play footy with Johnno. He is a hell of a good bloke. He played 260 senior games, four senior premierships and four junior premierships. That is a fantastic effort. Kevin's 51 years of contribution is probably longer than the age of most people in this chamber. So I shout out to Johnno, a fantastic guy. I played footy with him.

Baw Baw Big Blokes BBQ

Wayne FARNHAM (Narracan) (10:02): I would also like to shout out to the Big Blokes BBQ recently held at Lardner Park in Warragul which raises money for prostate cancer. I am going to one-up the member for Mildura on this one: they raised \$220,000, so you cannot come near that. They have been doing this fantastic work for a very long time and they continue to do it.

Member for Frankston

Wayne FARNHAM (Narracan) (10:02): In my last contribution I am just going to reference the member for Frankston. I am so glad to see he is back in his seat after his accident the other week. It would be very disappointing if he was not there, because I always chuckle when he gets kicked out by the Speaker and I want to continue to see that. So I am glad the member for Frankston is okay. Maybe if the government has another ministership, they should make him minister for superheroes.

Member for Frankston

Tim RICHARDSON (Mordialloc) (10:03): How do you follow that? You have got to shout out to Eddy, the member for Frankston – he is an absolute superstar. Not only that, he saved someone as well five days later.

Frankston level crossing removals

Tim RICHARDSON (Mordialloc) (10:03): I want to just acknowledge the works that are ramping up in Parkdale. The level crossing removal program is a substantial delivery for the Frankston train line: two level crossings gone for good by the middle of 2024 and a brand new train station. We know 20,000 vehicles pass through Parkdale each and every day. As works have ramped up, there has been a significant impact on congestion, on our community and on our Parkdale traders as well. But on the weekend everyone came out to celebrate Halloween. I do not think I have ever seen so many people

lining the streets and the traders strip in Parkdale. Thousands came out to support their local businesses and to support their traders as well. So a big shout-out to everyone that took the opportunity to get around those works to get down and support this thriving village community.

We know that when we do these works and create a more accessible, inclusive and safe environment in Parkdale, people will be able to walk and transition through. There will be more parking, greater green space and access for many years to come. But during these times we have just got to go that little bit further and take that opportunity to support them, and they will bounce back bigger and better than ever before into the future. It is part of our program to remove all level crossings on the Frankston train line, getting people home safer and sooner. And with the delivery of the Melbourne Metro rail tunnel, this will be a turn-up-and-go service by 2025, making our community safer and more accessible for the future.

State Electricity Commission

Martin CAMERON (Morwell) (10:04): One of the great things I get to do in my electorate is take my mobile office to the streets to hear what the general punter has to say about everything, especially the new Allan government. One of the big bugbears is bringing back the SEC. From the heartland of the former SEC, State Electricity Commission, former workers and now mums and dads are completely confused about what it is actually all about.

We have been bombarded not only via the media but particularly here in the chamber about what is going on, from providing 59,000 new jobs to immediately making our power bills drop. We have seen nothing from this grand scheme. We all call the government out on this being nothing more than a vote-grabbing policy for inner-city Melbourne voters, with no real plan and no real way forward. With the cost of living hurting everyone in the state and our energy bills skyrocketing, I have now worked out what the rebranded SEC stands for, and that is soaring energy costs. People in the valley know about it, and people around the state are just starting to know about it, but we are all living it. Do not forget: the SEC is all about soaring energy costs.

Country Fire Authority Melton and Eynesbury brigades

Steve McGHIE (Melton) (10:06): Over the last week I attended the Melton fire brigade and Eynesbury CFA annual awards night. Both were fantastic events to celebrate some of our incredible community members and the vital services they provide. Being a part of the CFA, their role as first responders is one that is often thankless. They attend cases for every single Victorian on their worst days. I would like to personally thank the entire Melton CFA branch for their dedicated service to our community and Melton CFA captain Justin Rees for his leadership. The service awards are a testament to their dedication to community.

Special congratulations to the Melton five years of service recipients: Troy Davis, Lorelei Geysing, Nathan Geysing, Devante Johns, Jamie Millington, Ebony Falzon and Manaia Robinson. I also congratulate Jacob Steele for his 10-year medal and Bailey Rhodes and Simon Vamplew for their 15-year medals. And special mention to Jeff Goudie for his national medal and Blair Dellemijn and Bryan Sliwa for their national medals first class. Elizabeth Marshall was acknowledged for her 40 years of service – amazing – along with Mary Dodemaide for 50 years and her husband John Dodemaide and Barry Mattinson for their 55 years of service.

I also attended the Eynesbury CFA awards where there were various awards presented, including for five years service to Nab Khoda, Ben Mulheran and Kate Mulheran; for 10 years service to Phil Bowden and Meghan Willingham, and to Brendan Gillespie for his 20 years of service. I also congratulate Kim Briggs, Ben Greene, Jason McEgan and Garrick Oates for their individual awards on the night, and of course the junior squad members were fantastic. I thank Kylie Newton, the captain of the Eynesbury CFA.

Mornington Peninsula fire

Chris CREWTHER (Mornington) (10:07): Thanks to our tireless firefighters, police and emergency services personnel from the Mornington Peninsula and surrounding areas, who put out a huge blaze last Friday evening in Main Street, Mornington. Thankfully there were no casualties; however, many local businesses and residents were impacted. My deepest thoughts are with the owners and teams of all businesses affected, destroyed or devastated by the blaze, including Colt, Millers Bread Cantina, Afghan Marcopolo, Brass Razu, Counting Wealth, Schnitz and Store 15. Thank you to every local who has got behind those affected so far, and let us continue to support them.

Guide Dogs Australia

Chris CREWTHER (Mornington) (10:08): I have a special helper in my electorate office for several weeks: Kelly. She is a baby labrador, and at 12 weeks of age she is on the path to her guide dog graduation. Kelly has been enjoying socialising and is gaining confidence with her training by my team member Donna, who is a guide dog volunteer. Raising puppies and volunteering for guide dogs plays an important role in helping Victorians with low vision. Guide Dogs Australia would love to hear from you if you can volunteer as a puppy raiser, in gardening, assisting with administration, dog walking, helping at the kennels or driving people with low vision to events.

Parole reform

Chris CREWTHER (Mornington) (10:08): Lastly, as a person who has been an MP covering Frankston and surrounding areas, I acknowledge that the government has backflipped and belatedly brought about a bill to keep Denyer behind bars. But they should have backed our bill months ago, instead of putting victims' families, many of whom I joined at the 30th anniversary months ago, through many more months of misery.

Reaching Out in the Inner West of Melbourne

Katie HALL (Footscray) (10:09): In Footscray our community comes together to make sure that no-one gets left behind, and I am honoured to acknowledge the amazing work of Randa and her group of volunteers who run Reaching Out in the Inner West of Melbourne, who I visited recently and who help those most in need in my community. When the group started in 2005 the selfless volunteers provided home-cooked meals, beverages, clothing, bedding and other essentials to around 20 people. They then began introducing open plate meals to bring people together. Reaching Out in the Inner West's motto is 'Love all, serve all. Help ever, hurt never', and this was never truer than during the pandemic when they supplied 400 meals every Monday night to people in need. Now they regularly provide services to 300 people weekly and have in excess of 70 hardworking volunteers.

There are many great organisations I would like to acknowledge who are supporting Reaching Out in the Inner West. Their major supporters are VU Polytechnic; Bendigo Community Bank, Seddon; Aldi; IGA West Footscray; Le Mans Toyota; Cobb Lane bakery; Master Dry Cleaners; FareShare; Asahi; Mister Nice Guy's Bakeshop; Knit4Charities; St Mary's College, Windsor; Emmanuel College, Altona; Bakery Gallery Cafe; and two restaurants Dukkah and Casa Di Tutti. I would like to acknowledge all of the volunteers who work tirelessly to feed people in need in our community.

Dussehra festival

Luba GRIGOROVITCH (Kororoit) (10:10): I ended my weekend on an absolutely huge high, as I had the opportunity to attend the festival of Dussehra at the Sri Durga Temple in Rockbank on Sunday afternoon. This festival and celebration marks the beginning of Diwali. This is the most auspicious time in the Hindu calendar. Diwali is a celebration of the festival of lights for Hindu, Sikh and Jain communities. The festival of lights celebrates the triumph of light over darkness, good over evil and the human ability to overcome. I was joined by many colleagues from this room, along with the Minister for Multicultural Affairs Ingrid Stitt from the other place. The festival celebrates the

goddess Durga. The festival was one of joy, dance, food, worship and fun, and we all got involved in it. The weekend saw over 20,000 people travel through the gates to attend the festival.

Sri Durga Temple is the largest Hindu temple in the Southern Hemisphere, and it sits in Kororoit. I could not be prouder. The executive at Sri Durga do incredible work and are there for people in their most challenging times. This was incredibly evident during COVID when the volunteers from Sri Durga cooked thousands upon thousands of meals and delivered them Victoria wide. To Joshi, Gary and the entire executive at Sri Durga, thank you for always having an open-door policy and for welcoming all visitors into your temple with open arms. This year Diwali falls on Sunday 12 November, and I look forward to more celebrations and more Indian sweets.

Russell Court Kindergarten and Children's Centre

Mathew HILAKARI (Point Cook) (10:12): Thank you to Marie from Russell Court kindergarten in Altona Meadows, who lovingly showed me the Altona Pier memorabilia that they have received as part of the program of change in Altona. *(Time expired)*

Statements on parliamentary committee reports

Public Accounts and Estimates Committee

Appointment of the Parliamentary Budget Officer

Mathew HILAKARI (Point Cook) (10:12): I will stay on my feet. I talk of course to the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee's (PAEC) report relating to the appointment of the Parliamentary Budget Officer. Our report was handed down in October of this year, which was exceedingly wonderful. The chair of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee the member for Laverton is not in the chamber at the moment, but I want to just pay particular tribute to her; to a former member of the committee the member for Box Hill, who is in the chamber; to a member for Western Victoria from the other place Bev McArthur, and particularly I note her incisive questioning; and the member for Melbourne, who I cannot see in the chamber at this time. We all played a pretty critical role in making sure that we got the PBO set up and recommended to the Treasurer.

Of course PAEC has a number of important roles, one of which is to recommend the appointment of the PBO to the Treasurer. Amongst its other roles are ensuring the PBO is held to account and observing their annual reporting and their operations. I would like to thank the secretariat, who always provide great service to all the committees across the Parliament: Dr Caroline Williams, the executive officer; Dr Krystle Gatt Rapa, the lead analyst; Caitlin Wu, analyst; and Jacqueline Coleman, the administrative assistant. We always rely so much on their advice and support.

The member for Laverton in her foreword said:

Victoria is the first Australian state or territory to have established an ongoing Parliamentary Budget Office ...

It was created back in 2017. I think it is a particular point of pride for this chamber that we have been leaders in this space, because the Parliamentary Budget Office provides costings, advisory services and analysis for all members of this Parliament. That is a really important thing, because we want the policy ideas that we put forward to be accurate, well costed and well thought through, and the Parliamentary Budget Office provides that support. We have now seen two elections in which the Parliamentary Budget Office has provided that support and those election costings.

As part of this recruitment campaign Jennifer D'Arcy-Smith from Watermark Search played an incredibly important role in bringing together particularly some really high-quality candidates. The previous Parliamentary Budget Officer was Mr Anthony Close, and I want to acknowledge the importance of founding the office and setting those foundations well for all future Parliamentary Budget Officers. He undertook a five-year term. Of course the objectives of the PBO are to inform policy development and public debate in the Parliament and in the broader Victorian community. There is no more important time than this to be able to provide good factual information to the

community, when there is such a lack of good factual information which has been propagated more broadly. For a Parliament to have this support and advice is incredibly important.

Like all of these offices, they are led by an individual, and that individual has to support a team – in this case, 24 full-time equivalent staff in the lead-up to the last election. So they need to be mindful about how they manage their resources well. A budget of \$3.4 million in 2023–24 is not an insubstantial amount to support staff and finances, to support members of the opposition and the crossbench in particular, and also members of the government. I am one who has used such a service before. I want to also pay tribute to some of the others on the selection panel who were of a really high quality. We had Yves Giroux, who is a Canadian public budget officer; we had Bridget Noonan, the Clerk of the Legislative Assembly; David Martine, who at the time was the Secretary of the Department of Treasury and Finance; and Jason Loos, who at the time was a deputy secretary and land coordinator general of the Department of Premier and Cabinet. We made a recommendation for a five-year term, as we should – it gives the continuity and stability for the PBO to undertake their role. We recommended and subsequently appointed Mr Rimmer, who was the acting PBO at the time. What I thought was the best thing about Mr Rimmer and the thing that spoke to me most was his commitment to the role of the Parliamentary Budget Office itself, to public accountability and to public service. I wish Mr Rimmer all the best in his role, and I look forward to working with him over the five-year term, should that exist for me.

Public Accounts and Estimates Committee

Report on the 2023–24 Budget Estimates

Richard RIORDAN (Polwarth) (10:17): I too rise this morning to speak on the Public Accounts and Estimate Committee's recent report handed to the Parliament. In particular I refer to chapter 7 on the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, and it is housing I wish to speak to today. It was a rather incisive report again. Having been on the Public Accounts and Estimate Committee (PAEC), I know the government can often be accused of trying to sugar-coat some of the findings and some of the evidence that is brought before the committee – I am looking at some past members – and there is often a robust discussion, but I am pleased to report that by and large the concerns and sentiments of many around the government's Big Housing Build are covered off quite well in this report. I refer readers particularly to pages 107 through to about page 114, where much of the government's performance on housing is detailed quite well.

What this report does is really highlight the fact that this government is not being transparent with its data. It is not being transparent with what its output is, and in the midst of a housing crisis it comes as a huge surprise not only to the opposition but to the Victorian public and those waiting on waiting lists, that this government still refuses to release what its actual housing stock is. The Victorian *Housing Assistance: Additional Service Delivery Data*, which is the key document that has been produced by governments of the day for years, basically outlines how many homes exist in Victoria. The report brings to the reader's attention that the government just has not been transparent in releasing that, and as such, it is really difficult for the committee, the Victorian Parliament and Victorians generally to understand what benefits the Big Housing Build is bringing to the net increase of homes here in Victoria.

I note that the report also refers to the evidence given at a time when the minister was pushed quite hard on what is the net gain of new homes available to the social housing pool to help that enormous register of people that continues to grow. The report highlights the fact that just in the last 12 months the number of people on the Victorian housing register grew from 64,304 up to 67,985. For every year this Labor government has been in, the number of people on the waiting list continues to grow, the families on the list continue to grow, and it is now estimated that well in excess of 100,000 people are on the waiting list. This report highlights that despite the fact the government claims to be spending \$5.3 billion on new housing and have had that big benchmark of 12,000 homes, under evidence at PAEC the minister at last fessed up that, no, we are not getting 12,000 extra homes. His guess is 8200, but even that guess is unverifiable because they refuse to release the data.

So it came as no surprise for me when I attended the Flemington towers community meeting on Monday night – there was probably quite a few hundred people in the room, people that have lived 20, 30 years in those communities – that their single biggest concern was a complete lack of trust in this government to deliver the promised rebuild of the towers. It was quite concerning as a member of this Parliament to be in that meeting when people asked genuine questions – ‘When will the towers be completed? Who will own the towers when they are completed? How will we know the size of our apartments, how big they will be? Will we be going from like to like?’ – and on every single one of those questions Homes Victoria was unable to tell the community what they were going to get. Why? This PAEC report makes it quite clear that there is no transparency.

In fact it also points out that the government has not actually allocated any funds for this redevelopment. What Homes Victoria did not tell people but this report makes clear is that there is no money allocated, and as such they have made the grand announcement of housing tower redevelopment without funds, without a plan, without developers. What they have essentially done is created huge concern and mistrust among the families of many thousands of people who rely on the state to provide that roof over their head. So I recommend people read this year’s PAEC report. It makes clear that we need more transparency around the data. We need to know clearly how many homes we own in this state, particularly in the midst of a housing crisis, and it is simply not good enough that we put large sums of the budget to work without any transparency.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: Member for Polwarth, just for clarity, was that the PAEC report on the 2023–24 budget estimates?

Richard RIORDAN: Correct.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: Thank you.

Public Accounts and Estimates Committee

Appointment of a Person to Conduct the Performance Audit of the Auditor-General and Victorian Auditor-General’s Office

Lauren KATHAGE (Yan Yean) (10:22): I rise to speak on the *Appointment of a Person to Conduct the Performance Audit of the Auditor-General and Victorian Auditor-General’s Office* report, tabled in October 2023. As a member of the Public Accounts and Estimate Committee (PAEC) I was very happy to participate in this process. The Auditor-General and the Victorian Auditor-General’s Office (VAGO) have an esteemed reputation in Victoria, and it is important that we maintain the public’s confidence in the Victorian Auditor-General’s Office. One of the ways we do that is by ensuring that at least every four years a performance audit is conducted so that we can be reassured that the information and guidance that is coming from that office is robust and appropriate.

PAEC has made a recommendation to both houses on the appointment of a suitably qualified person to undertake that performance audit. What they are really looking at in this audit is, as I said, most importantly maintaining trust through being reassured of the independence and objectivity of that office. They deal with important and sensitive topics, so we need to be sure that we can have full faith there, and we certainly do. It is also important that we assess the ability of the office to work collaboratively with Victorian agencies and stakeholders. If the office is to obtain all of the necessary and relevant information to allow them to conduct their audits, they need to engage respectfully and appropriately with other agencies to allow them to access that information. At the same time, the performance audit will ensure that those relationships are appropriate and that they are finding that right balance between obtaining information and maintaining impartiality.

We want to make sure that the audits are produced using the latest methodologies and tools available to auditors. So as part of this performance audit they will be reviewing what tools and standards they use in the preparation of their reports. We want quality reports and quality recommendations to provide robust options for future actions or future steps. That is why it is really important that we can feel

confident that when they are assessing a particular topic they are using the most cutting-edge approaches to that. That helps with improving public confidence in the work of the office as well.

It is also important to note that, as with most audits, this performance audit will take a sample of completed works and in reviewing those completed works will look to see that there is sufficient evidence to adequately support the findings that are included in the reports. In that sample of reports they will also be looking to ensure that they are balanced and that there are no material or unjustified omissions of adverse findings, which is very important. We also need to make sure through this performance audit that the recommendations from VAGO are clear, concise and actionable. We need to be confident that we can pick up a report and make decisions around implementing clear recommendations. It needs to be very straightforward in that sense. Of course, as with all parts of the wider public sector, we need to ensure that the processes are devoid of fear, favour and affection.

Because they are performed at least every four years, it means that the performance audits can make assessments about whether continuous improvement has been built into the processes and systems of VAGO and that they are accountable for ensuring continued improvement within the office and within the management of that office. So as far as the management of that office goes, we need to make sure that staff are engaged and that the leadership focuses on wellbeing. We expect the final performance audit report to be tabled in Parliament in May 2024.

Public Accounts and Estimates Committee

Report on the 2023–24 Budget Estimates

Annabelle CLEELAND (Euroa) (10:27): Today I rise to speak on the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee report on the 2023–24 budget estimates. I will not go into the entire report with its 308 pages, 129 findings and 82 recommendations, but there are a few points that I want to discuss that deeply impact my community.

One of the biggest complaints that we get in my office on a daily basis online, via emails and via any form of communication is the trouble that we have with our road network. Findings relating to the Department of Transport and Planning raised several concerns about the condition of our roads, particularly those that have been impacted by floods and those in regional Victoria. Finding 56 discusses funding allocated towards road maintenance and renewal. A big part of this – with the consequence of increasing road fatalities – is the constant slashing of the road maintenance budget. We have seen road maintenance funding decrease from \$702.2 million to just \$441.6 million in the last year alone, despite the dire state of Victoria’s regional network.

Since 2020, 45 per cent of the road maintenance budget has been cut. Roads in regional Victoria are still in desperate need of attention. I have spoken to several mechanics throughout the electorate who continually say that the trouble with the roads is that their current state is having a real impact on families’ cost-of-living pressures, with constant repairs needed because the state of the roads is not fit for purpose. The roads needed fixing before the October floods, and now they are in dire condition. If anyone would like to argue against this, I would love to take them for a drive. We have potholes everywhere, crumbling roadsides and compromised services in every town in the Euroa electorate. Cutting funding from something so necessary goes to show how out of touch this Labor government is with the needs of regional Victoria.

The roads are causing problems for commuters, the transport industry and visitors to our region. Labor’s pothole-patching program is cheap, temporary and totally ineffective. There are real consequences to this, and they are not just budgetary. Finding 62 raises serious concerns about the number of lives lost on Victorian roads. I will talk to the data on this, but what we have to remember is that these are people’s lives. These are children, parents, families and friends that are losing their lives because of the constant slashing of our road maintenance budget. As of 6 August 2023 there was a 24.6 per cent increase in the number of lives lost compared to the same time the previous year, a

nearly 30 per cent increase compared to the five-year average. This is the truth. We should be doing what we can to help prevent the issue, and it starts with the quality and safety of our roads.

Roads continue to be one of the biggest concerns of my constituents. In a recent newsletter I asked people within my electorate to tell me about the roads – what are the worst roads in the local area? For an electorate that spans 12,000 square kilometres, there was not one road that was not complained about. This is not an issue that is isolated to one area. Our entire regional road network is in disarray and needs fixing. I know from my colleagues that this is a widespread issue that everyone has deep concerns about. We are also seeing the consequences of this budget slashing in insurance issues, with mechanics complaining that vehicles are being damaged due to the poor condition of roads and with owners having difficulties receiving much-needed compensation for repairs, and we are seeing delays in processing compensation at Regional Roads Victoria. I have helped process countless insurance claims.

Another point I would like to raise about the PAEC report is about the findings regarding the Department of Education, and these must be addressed. We have seen many schools applying for grants seemingly being ignored. One stat that jumps out at me is that 93 per cent of the investment is being funnelled into Labor seats and only 6 per cent into Liberal and Nationals seats, relative to Labor holding just 63 per cent of the seats. This is pork-barrelling at its worst.

Public Accounts and Estimates Committee

Report on the 2023–24 Budget Estimates

Paul HAMER (Box Hill) (10:32): I too rise to talk about the 2023–24 Public Accounts and Estimates Committee budget estimates report, which I was very pleased to be a part of. I think the member for Gippsland South previously summarised it as an excellent report, and I do agree with his conclusion. It did take a significant amount of work from all parties and all participants in that process.

I specifically want to talk today about chapter 6, which is ‘Department of Transport and Planning’. First I will reflect on the infrastructure program. It is identified that the total infrastructure program is now \$43 billion, \$33.8 billion of which is in the department’s existing infrastructure program, with another \$9.2 billion of total estimated investment in new projects. This is just a summary of the enormous investment in transport infrastructure. I can see the Minister for Transport Infrastructure has just stepped into the room. He has carriage of this very important portfolio, which for many years – for the life of the Andrews government – has been delivering for communities across the state, particularly including my own community of Box Hill, through the level crossing removal program and also now going on to the North East Link and the Suburban Rail Loop. It is a very sizeable program, and it is delivering an enormous amount of benefits for our state.

There are a couple of really important recommendations that are within this chapter. The first ones I want to look at are recommendations 28 and 29. Recommendation 28 recommends the introduction of two new performance measures that report on the number of new zero-emission buses that are added to metropolitan and regional bus networks, and recommendation 29 recommends the introduction of an objective indicator in the 2024–25 budget that reports on zero emissions as a proportion of all operational buses in the Victorian fleet.

As you may remember, I think it was probably in 2021 that the then Minister for Public Transport made the announcement that from 2025 all purchases of buses would be zero-emission buses. The bus fleet obviously does make a significant contribution to our emissions. Just the nature of the capital investment required with a bus means you will be having that bus on the road for many, many years, so this is a long-term investment. It takes a long time for the whole fleet to be renewed. It is pleasing to see the investment from the government and industry as well is not just waiting until 2025. There has already been a take-up of the manufacture of zero-emission buses. I think it is a really strong recommendation to identify how we are going to be tracking against that target and to identify how the number and proportion of zero-emission buses will grow into the future.

The other particular area that I would like to focus on within this chapter is the ports and freight area, and I see that the minister responsible, the Minister for Ports and Freight, is at the table as well. It talks specifically about the mode shift incentive scheme. I did have some involvement with the mode shift incentive scheme when it was initially introduced, as a staff member in the department at that time. It has provided a really important incentive over its decade of operation, particularly to regional operators. I am glad to see that while that program is ending the department is looking at other measures.

Public Accounts and Estimates Committee

Report on the 2023–24 Budget Estimates

Cindy McLEISH (Eildon) (10:37): I rise to make a contribution today on the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee's 2023–24 budget estimates report, and in particular chapter 7, the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing chapter, which refers to family violence and housing and the interrelationship between those, and it makes a number of recommendations.

Family violence is the main reason why women and children leave their homes in Australia, and I think family violence should be front of mind at the moment. Upstairs, as we speak, is a Respect Victoria function. If I may, I will read to the house the vision of Respect Victoria, because I think it is something that we need to remember. Its vision is:

... a Victorian community where all people are safe, equal and respected, and live free from family violence and violence against women.

Putting in that context that family violence is the main reason why women and children leave their homes, this also should be front of mind: in the last 10 days it is absolutely appalling that five women have lost their lives to alleged family violence, and that includes here in Victoria. I have spoken to many, many victims of family violence, and there is a lot to be done to move this ship forward and change the direction. We really need to get those numbers down, but it is a really hard task to do, and it is fraught with many challenges.

Over the last 12 months I have visited many Orange Doors, and I have seen them in various states – some have been operating for a number of years and some have just come on board – and heard of some of the issues and the teething problems that they have. But one of the things that I guess really stands out for me is some of the blockages in the system and the backlogs. One Orange Door service mentioned to me that when they ring the 20 motels in their area the phone will only get picked up by five of those, because the others either do not want to have anything to do with it or have already got their fair share. It is fair to say that the backlogs mean that women and children are not moved through the system. If there is a blockage in a refuge, it means that somebody ends up in a hotel beforehand. There are blockages in refuges because people cannot find appropriate accommodation. There are a lot of challenges with the exit pathways from the refuge and crisis accommodation into this stable, secure and long-term accommodation, particularly for those on low incomes. One of the things that is really important is that when families move they lose their connectedness to communities. Children lose their connectedness to their friends and to their school and have to start again, and if they have to have that repeated movement it can really do a lot of damage.

In the 2023–24 state budget it tells us that the refuges offer a short-term safety response to those at highest risk of injury or death, but at the same time the length of stays in refuges is much longer than people would think, and it depends on a variety of factors, including assessed risk, safety needs and suitable exit options. The average length of stay for women and children in a refuge in 2022–23 was 51 nights and 55 nights, so women and then women with children, which might be a little bit lower, but it is still a huge concern that you have got somebody for a couple of months being in a refuge, which is really supposed to be a short-term, move-them-on type of thing.

In the last five years the number of women who have accessed emergency accommodation through specialist family violence services averages around 2500. That is the women, but for women with

children it was 1000 to 1200, and this, as I said, is for the last five years, so from 2018 to 2023. So there is a lot of work that we still need to do in this space.

A lot of talk is about educating younger children in terms of respect. That is all good, but at the same time our education system is pushing children more and more to using the internet and tablets. I think that is a real risk, because they are looking at content that is for adult eyes only and often they are getting the wrong end of the stick. So we are trying to do one thing at one end, but at the same time our education system is working against that, and we need to look at that to change.

Bills

Workplace Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Amendment (WorkCover Scheme Modernisation) Bill 2023

Statement of compatibility

Danny PEARSON (Essendon – Minister for Transport Infrastructure, Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, Assistant Treasurer, Minister for WorkSafe and the TAC) (10:43): In accordance with the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006, I table a statement of compatibility in relation to the Workplace Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Amendment (WorkCover Scheme Modernisation) Bill 2023.

In accordance with the *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006* (the **Charter**), I table a statement of compatibility in relation to the **Workplace Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Amendment (WorkCover Scheme Modernisation) Bill 2023** (the **Bill**).

In accordance with section 28 of the Charter, I make this statement of compatibility with respect to the Bill.

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

Overview of the Bill

The Bill makes various amendments to the *Workplace Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 2013* (the **Principal Act**), the **Accident Compensation Act** (the **AC Act**) and the *Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004* (the **OHS Act**).

The amendments in the Bill relevantly seek to:

- introduce new eligibility requirements for work-related mental injuries so that only mental injuries diagnosed by a medical practitioner in accordance with the most recent edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (**DSM**) that are predominantly arising out of or in the course of employment are compensable;
- clarify that there will be no entitlement to compensation for mental injuries that are predominantly caused by work-related stress or burnout arising from events that may be considered usual or typical and are reasonably expected to occur in the course of the worker's duties;
- confirm that mental injuries predominantly caused by work-related stress or burnout resulting from traumatic events experienced by a worker that may be considered usual or typical and reasonably expected to occur remain compensable;
- introduce a Whole Person Impairment (**WPI**) threshold of greater than 20 per cent, alongside the existing capacity test, for injured workers to remain entitled to weekly payments beyond the 130 week second entitlement period;
- clarify that disputes relating to whether a worker has suffered an injury in circumstances that are compensable under the WIRC Act are not disputes that can be referred to the Workplace Injury Commission (**WIC**) for arbitration;
- amend the Principal Act and the OHS Act to allow the Authority to use information collected for the purpose of those Acts to fulfil its functions or exercise its powers under any Act, in certain conditions; and
- requires the Minister to cause an independent review of the amendments to the WorkCover Scheme arising out of this Bill, in the 2027 calendar year.

Human rights issues

The Bill may engage and limit a number of rights that are protected by the Charter, including the right to equality (section 8), the right to privacy (section 13(a)) and the right to a fair hearing (section 24).

For the reasons detailed below, I am satisfied that the Bill is compatible with the Charter and, if any of the abovementioned rights are limited, those limitations are reasonable and demonstrably justified having regard to the factors within section 7(2) of the Charter.

Section 8(3) – Right to Equality

Section 8(3) of the Charter provides that every person is equal before the law and is entitled to equal protection of the law without discrimination and has the right to equal and effective protection against discrimination. The purpose of the right in section 8(3) is to ensure that all laws and policies are applied equally. ‘Discrimination’ for the purposes of the Charter is defined by reference to the definition in the *Equal Opportunity Act 2010* (the **EO Act**) on the basis of an attribute in section 6 of that Act. Relevant attributes include (but are not limited to) age, race, sex and disability. ‘Disability’ is defined in section 4(1) of the EO Act to include a mental or psychological disease or disorder.

Eligibility requirements for mental injury

The Principal Act already imposes special eligibility requirements for mental injuries. Section 40(1) of the Principal Act provides that there is no entitlement to compensation if a mental injury is caused wholly or predominantly by, among other things, reasonable management action. There is no entitlement to compensation for mental injury in the circumstances specified in section 40(1) of the Principal Act because it was considered that employers should not be liable for mental injuries that arise from the legal exercise of the rights of the employer to manage their workforce.

Clauses 4, 5 and 6 of the Bill will introduce additional eligibility requirements for mental injuries.

- Clause 4 of the Bill will introduce a definition of ‘mental injury’, which is currently undefined. Under clause 4, ‘mental injuries’ will be defined as injuries that cause significant behavioural, cognitive or psychological dysfunction and are diagnosed by a medical practitioner in accordance with latest DSM. That definition will have the effect of narrowing the concept of ‘mental injury’, which is not presently defined and therefore is not limited to dysfunctions that are ‘significant’ or diagnosed in accordance with the DSM.
- Clause 5(2) of the Bill will have the effect that a person will only be entitled to compensation for mental injuries predominantly arising out of or in the course of employment.
- Clause 6 of the Bill will have the effect that a worker is not entitled to compensation for a mental injury predominantly caused by stress or burnout that has arisen from events that may be considered usual or typical and reasonably expected to occur in the course of the worker’s duties. However, clause 5(3) will have the effect that despite the exclusion in clause 6, a worker is entitled to compensation for a mental injury if it is caused by traumatic events experienced by the worker that may be considered usual or typical and expected to occur in the course of the worker’s usual duties.

These changes will result in some workers who have a mental or psychological disease or disorder (and therefore have a ‘disability’ as defined under the EO Act) no longer being eligible to receive compensation under the Principal Act. That may in turn engage section 8(3) of the Charter, on the basis that the provisions may discriminate on the basis of disability by introducing new eligibility requirements into the Principal Act for workers seeking compensation for a work-related mental injury.

Any discrimination that is effected by clauses 4 to 6 is demonstrably justified. Clauses 4 to 6 serve two important purposes.

First, they are intended to ensure that the process for the assessment of mental injuries is rigorous. Currently, the assessment of mental or psychiatric injuries is not undertaken in the same way as physical injuries. Diagnosis of mental injuries presently relies largely on self-reporting and examination by medical practitioners. As a result, diagnosis generally turns on clinical judgement and consideration of the subjective viewpoint of claimants. Because of this, mental injuries may be more susceptible to misrepresentation by the claimant as compared to physical injuries. Further, there are particular difficulties involved in establishing a sufficient causal link between the general activities of a worker’s role and their mental injury. Among other things, that is because mental injuries can often be the result of a myriad of factors, including a worker’s personal life and their interpersonal relationships.

The Bill seeks to address these issues by requiring a diagnosis be made in accordance with the latest DSM and by requiring that the mental injury predominantly arise out of or in the course of any employment.

Second, the amendments reflect the fact that while compensation should be available for mental injury in appropriate cases, the WorkCover Scheme must also remain financially sustainable for the long term. The

requirements that mental injuries must cause 'significant' dysfunction in clause 4, and clauses 5(2) and 6, are directed to that purpose. Clauses 5(2) and 6 effect specific and targeted exclusion of mental injuries caused by the general stressors of the modern workplace and modern life. Providing financial compensation in respect of claims that are not clearly attributable to employment or serious psychological stressors risks the imposition of significant costs on the compensation scheme that would undermine its ongoing viability. The importance of ensuring the financial viability of the scheme is recognised by the Principal Act in sections 493(1)(g) and 493(2).

At the same time, the Bill recognises that some jobs necessarily involve exposure to traumatic events and that this should not mean that a person is not entitled to compensation if they develop a mental injury caused by work related stress or burnout, as a result of exposure to those events.

Thus, an important qualification to the limitation effected by clause 6 is contained in clause 5(3), which recognises the fact that certain workers (such as frontline workers) may regularly be exposed to trauma, and ensures that these workers are entitled to receive compensation even if the trauma is a usual or typical part of their roles. Clause 5(3) provides that a worker is entitled to compensation if they suffer a mental injury predominantly caused by traumatic events experienced by the worker that may be considered usual or typical and expected to occur in the course of the worker's duties.

Clauses 4 to 6 seek to ensure that support is available for those workers who experience a diagnosed mental injury resulting from serious workplace events, while ensuring that the diagnosis is undertaken in a rigorous manner and that there is a sufficient nexus between the mental injury and the worker's employment, having regard to the need to ensure that the scheme is financially sustainable.

Moreover, the existing access to provisional payments for mental injury provide tailored support to those workers who have suffered an injury, but are not eligible for compensation under the WIRC Act. These supports aim to deliver earlier medical treatment and targeted return to work support to assist workers in achieving improved return to work outcomes. These supports also seek to connect workers with other more suitable support services to encourage improved health and return to work outcomes.

Importantly, workers will continue to have an ability to dispute decisions relating to their eligibility for compensation through conciliation, internal Agent review, WorkSafe's Worker's Compensation Independent Review Service and the courts.

To the extent, if any, that these clauses impose a limitation on the right to equality, for the reasons detailed above I consider that this limitation is reasonable and justifiable in accordance with section 7(2) of the Charter and as such, these clauses are compatible with the right to equality.

Weekly payments after the second entitlement period

Clauses 13, 14 and 15 of the Bill will introduce additional eligibility requirements for injured workers to continue to receive weekly payments beyond the second entitlement period of 130 weeks into sections 163, 164 and 165 of the Principal Act. These clauses introduce a WPI threshold alongside the existing work capacity test. Once these changes are enacted, only those workers with no ongoing capacity to work and with a WPI of more than 20 per cent will be eligible to continue receiving weekly payments. Consequently, those workers with a lower WPI score will be disadvantaged under these reforms.

Further, clause 17 of the Bill amends section 175 of the Principal Act to apply these changes to those workers residing out of Australia, who, in addition to establishing they have no ongoing capacity for work indefinitely, will be required to demonstrate a WPI of more than 20 per cent after the expiration of the second entitlement period to continue to receive weekly payments. Clauses 26 to 29 make equivalent changes to the **AC Act** to apply to injuries occurring before 1 July 2014 which have not yet passed the second entitlement period.

The operation of clauses 13 to 17, and changes to the determination of entitlement to ongoing weekly payments after the expiration of the second entitlement period may affect the right to equality by treating people unfavorably on the basis they have a particular disability.

These reforms are necessary to ensure that weekly payments after the second entitlement period take into account that some workers will continue to have no ability to return to work after their injury. They are intended to ensure that financial compensation is available to those injured workers who are most in need of ongoing support, that is, workers with a permanent impairment resulting from their work-related injury who have no ongoing work capacity indefinitely. This revised test for ongoing entitlement seeks to achieve that purpose by introducing an objective assessment of permanent incapacity. That objective assessment is undertaken in accordance with the procedure to be established by clause 16. Broadly, assessment of impairment will be conducted consistently with existing processes for assessing impairment benefits compensation under Division 4 of Part 2 of the Principal Act. Decisions will be based on the available medical evidence to support a decision to continue or cease weekly payments. Where workers dispute these decisions, they will continue to be able to refer medical questions in relation to the degree of impairment to Medical

Panels for a binding expert opinion. Where decisions made by the Authority, Agents or self-insurers relate to something that is not a medical question as to degree of impairment, such as a determination not to refer a worker for assessment, these disputes can be referred through existing dispute resolution pathways, including to conciliation by the WIC. In this way, the right to challenge decisions is maintained and decisions relating to impairment will be based on medical expertise.

The threshold of 20 per cent WPI has been identified as necessary to ensure that the scheme remains viable and able to continue to deliver services into the future. Importantly, workers who do not meet this revised test and new impairment threshold will be actively supported to transition to other income replacement services and suitable supports if they are unable to return to work.

To the extent that these clauses relating to WPI assessments after the expiry of the second entitlement impose a limitation on the right to equality, I consider that the limit is reasonable and justifiable in accordance with section 7(2) of the Charter.

Section 13(a) – Right to privacy

Section 13(a) of the Charter provides that a person has the right not to have their privacy unlawfully or arbitrarily interfered with. Section 13(a) contains internal limitations: interferences with privacy will only limit the right if they are unlawful or arbitrary. An interference will be lawful if it is permitted by a law which is precise and appropriately circumscribed, and will be arbitrary only if it is capricious, unpredictable, unjust or unreasonable, in the sense of being disproportionate to the legitimate aim sought.

The right to privacy is broad in nature. The fundamental values which the right to privacy expresses are the physical and psychological integrity, individual and social identity, and autonomy and inherent dignity, of the person. It protects the individual's interest in the freedom of their personal and social sphere.

Use of information that may be personal information

Clauses 22 and 31 of the Bill will introduce information-sharing provisions that will enable WorkSafe to share and use information more effectively across its insurance and health and safety business units. These clauses will enable information collected under either the Principal Act or OHS Act and associated regulations to be used by WorkSafe to perform its functions and exercise its powers under any Act, if the use of that information is reasonably necessary or directly related to the performance of a function or power conferred on WorkSafe under that Act. Clauses 22 and 31 may engage the right to privacy because it will permit WorkSafe to use information, which may be private and which has been collected by WorkSafe for a particular purpose, for a different purpose.

While WorkSafe is a single organisation, it has a dual function as Victoria's occupational health and safety regulator and administrator of Victoria's workers' compensation scheme, with each function subject to differing regulatory regimes under the OHS Act and Principal Act. Despite WorkSafe being a single organisation, both the Principal Act and the OHS Act place restrictions on how WorkSafe may use or share information, which applies to both internal and external sharing of information.

These restrictions inhibit WorkSafe's ability to use information that it collects for a workers compensation purpose to inform health and safety outcomes, or to use information that it collects for an occupational health and safety purpose, to improve support for injured workers.

Clauses 22 and 31 are intended to remove the stated restrictions, and thereby enable WorkSafe to use information that it has collected for one purpose for a further purpose of performing functions and exercising powers under other Acts administered by WorkSafe. In that way, they are intended to strengthen WorkSafe's ability to respond to workplace safety concerns and support injured workers. The provisions are tailored to their purpose: information will only be permitted to be used by WorkSafe to perform its functions or exercise its power under another Act, where it is reasonably necessary, or directly related to, one or more functions or powers conferred on WorkSafe by that Act. Further, and importantly, existing restrictions and protections relating to the release of personal and medical information will continue to apply. The operation of other relevant privacy legislation including *the Health Records Act 2001*, *the Privacy and Data Protection Act 2014* or *the Victorian Data Sharing Act 2017* and the operation of legal professional privilege will not be impacted.

For the reasons detailed above, I consider that the clauses do not result in an unlawful or arbitrary interference with the right to privacy, and that the impact that the clauses have on the right to privacy is proportionate in all the circumstances, having regard to the significant public benefits that will accrue from WorkSafe being able to share information across its business functions and the fact that the provisions are tailored to the purpose that they serve. On that basis, I consider that the Bill is compatible with the right to privacy in section 13(a) of the Charter.

Section 24(1) – Right to fair hearing

Section 24(1) of the Charter provides that a person charged with a criminal offence or a party to a civil proceeding has the right to have the charge or proceeding decided by a competent, independent and impartial court or tribunal after a fair and public hearing.

What constitutes a fair hearing will depend on all the circumstances, including the legislative framework, the nature of the decision to be made, the nature and complexity of the issues and the impact of the decision to the rights and interests of the parties.

The right to a public hearing incorporates the principle that justice should not only be done, but be seen to be done, by subjecting legal proceedings to public scrutiny. It has been described as an indispensable element of the rule of law in a democratic society.

The right to a fair hearing should be read together with sections 25, 26 and 27 of the Charter, which confers various criminal process rights.

Arbitration amendments

Arbitration was introduced into the Principal Act by the *Workplace Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Amendment (Arbitration) Act 2021*. Currently, disputes relating to whether a worker has an injury that was sustained in circumstances giving rise to an entitlement to compensation under the Principal Act, may proceed to arbitration following unsuccessful conciliation, as an alternative method of dispute resolution compared to commencing court proceedings. The WIC is limited to awarding up to 52 weeks of weekly payments or up to \$20,000 in medical and like expenses by way of an arbitration determination. Appeals from decisions of the WIC may only be brought in relation to questions of law.

Clauses 23 and 24 of the Bill will provide that disputes relating to whether a worker has an injury that was incurred in circumstances giving rise to an entitlement to compensation under the Principal Act can proceed to conciliation, but can no longer be referred to arbitration. Consequently, where the matter has not resolved at conciliation, disputes relating to these matters will be required to be resolved at Court. Insofar as this amendment limits the right in s 24(1), the limitation is justified.

While clauses 23 and 24 remove the ability to submit a matter concerning whether a worker has an injury that was sustained in circumstances giving rise to an entitlement to compensation under the Principal Act to arbitration, it does not mean that a decision of the Authority or self-insurer concerning entitlement to compensation may not be challenged. The effect of clause 24 is, rather, to direct all disputes concerning specified matters under the Principal Act to courts after unsuccessful conciliation rather than arbitration. This has the effect that decisions concerning initial entitlement to compensation are subject to the dispute process that existed prior to the introduction of arbitration in 2022. In those circumstances, the extent of the limitation on the right to a fair hearing is relatively minor.

Clause 24 pursues an important public purpose. As explained above, under the Principal Act, appeals may only be brought from arbitration determinations on questions of law. This has the effect of limiting the capacity of parties to challenge arbitration determinations. This effectively provides two pathways to dispute decisions after conciliation, which may lead to different potential outcomes based on similar questions of fact. This may lead to unfair outcomes for workers. Amending the Principal Act to provide that all eligibility disputes, not just those relating to mental injury, are subject to the same process is intended to reduce the potential for inconsistency by requiring all such disputes to be decided by the courts. This will result in the development of judicial precedent concerning the provisions related to entitlement to compensation (including the new mental injury provisions), which will in turn, result in guidance as to the operation of those provisions. There is no less restrictive means of achieving those purposes.

For those reasons, any limitation on the fair hearing right effected by clauses 23 and 24 is demonstrably justified.

Danny Pearson MP
Minister for WorkSafe and the TAC

Second reading

Danny PEARSON (Essendon – Minister for Transport Infrastructure, Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, Assistant Treasurer, Minister for WorkSafe and the TAC) (10:44): I move:

That this bill be now read a second time.

I ask that my second-reading speech be incorporated into *Hansard*.

Incorporated speech as follows, except for statement under section 85(5) of the Constitution Act 1975:

The Bill makes several amendments to the **Workplace Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 2013** to deliver on the Victorian Government's commitment to build a modern workers' compensation scheme that gives security to Victorian workers and businesses and helps workers get healthy and back to work, following a workplace injury. These changes address the increasing financial pressure on the WorkCover Scheme (Scheme), amending structural issues in the design of the Scheme to respond to these challenges. This Bill will deliver a more contemporary, sustainable Scheme that will continue to support injured Victorian workers into the future. These legislative changes, combined with premiums that better reflect the cost of claims and the creation of Return to Work Victoria, will ensure that the Scheme and the Victorian Government continue to support positive outcomes for Victorian workers into the future.

The Bill makes a range of amendments to the **Workplace Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 2013** and **Accident Compensation Act 1985** to:

- a. introduce additional eligibility requirements for mental injury so that only significant mental injuries diagnosed by a medical practitioner in accordance with the most recent Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) that predominantly arise out of or in the course of employment are compensable;
- b. clarify that there will be no entitlement to compensation for mental injuries that are predominantly caused by work-related stress or burnout arising from events that may be considered usual or typical and are reasonably expected to occur in the course of the worker's duties;
- c. confirm that, where a worker's duties are usually or typically traumatic, mental injuries predominantly caused by work-related stress or burnout as a result of traumatic events experienced by a worker remain compensable;
- d. clarify that disputes relating to initial eligibility decisions under the **Workplace Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 2013** cannot be referred to arbitration;
- e. introduce a permanent Whole Person Impairment (WPI) threshold of more than 20 per cent, alongside the existing work capacity test, for injured workers to remain entitled to weekly benefits beyond the 130-week second entitlement period; and
- f. require the Minister to cause an independent review of the amendments to the Scheme arising out of this Bill, by an expert panel, during the 2027 calendar year.

Finally, the Bill further amends the **Workplace Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 2013** and the **Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004** to allow information collected in accordance with either Act, to be used where reasonably necessary or directly related to a function or purpose of WorkSafe Victoria under any Act that it administers.

I will now address each of these amendments in more detail, turning first to the amendments relating to compensation for mental injuries.

Workers Compensation for mental injury

The Scheme was designed more than 30 years ago, primarily to respond to physical injuries. Since that time, the number of mental injuries has increased, now representing approximately 16 per cent of all new claims and around 50 per cent of costs to the Scheme. We know that workers with mental injuries have poorer return to work outcomes, remaining off work for longer than those with physical injuries, increasing the duration and cost of claims supported by the Scheme.

The mental injury eligibility reforms are designed to strengthen the nexus between employment and its potential to cause injury. It also improves the rigour applied to diagnosing mental health conditions, to ensure the Scheme supports those it was intended to.

The Bill introduces a definition of mental injury as an injury that causes significant behavioural, cognitive or psychological dysfunction and is diagnosed by a medical practitioner in accordance with the most recent version of the DSM. Therefore, injuries that do not significantly impair or impact a worker's function, or are not diagnosed in accordance with the DSM, will not be eligible for compensation under the Scheme. The Bill also requires a mental injury to be predominantly caused by work to be compensable.

The Bill will introduce an additional exclusion for compensation for mental injuries predominantly caused by work related stress or burnout that has arisen from events that may be considered usual or typical and reasonably expected to occur in the course of a worker's duties.

In this context, 'predominantly caused' takes its ordinary meaning and refers to the strongest or largest contributing factor relative to all others. This may be proved by establishing that the contribution of employment is greater than the sum of all other contributing factors.

Events that are reasonably expected to occur, or that are typical or usual, include modern work-related stressors that most workers experience during employment, such as reasonable additional hours and reasonable work-related interpersonal interactions. The determination of eligibility for a mental injury claim will consider what is reasonably expected to occur during the course of that worker's employment. For example, certain interpersonal conflict, workload pressure and long hours are not considered to be unusual or go beyond what is reasonably expected in the course of employment.

However, events that would not be reasonably expected or typical in employment include where the worker experiences bullying, harassment of any kind or discrimination. Mental injuries predominantly caused by experiences of this kind will not be captured by the new exclusion and will remain compensable.

The exclusion relating to usual or typical duties a worker would be expected to undertake will not apply to a worker who routinely experiences traumatic events in the usual course of their duties and whose injury was predominantly caused by experiencing those traumatic events. Where a worker's mental injury is predominantly caused by traumatic events experienced by the worker that may be considered usual or typical, and reasonably expected to occur in the course of their duties, the worker will continue to be eligible for compensation. This includes the experience of vicarious trauma.

This exception to the new exclusion is intended to apply to workers in frontline roles, emergency service roles and other occupations with regular exposure to traumatic events as part of their usual duties, many of these being public sector workers. As a result of the traumatic nature of this work, these workers will continue to be eligible for compensation despite the mental injury being predominantly caused by their usual or typical employment. Where a worker is exposed to trauma, they do not need to demonstrate a diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder to satisfy the exception, as any mental injury captured by the new definition would be eligible for compensation.

These changes ensure that workers experiencing a significant work-related mental injury that is predominantly the result of work-related events continue to be supported in recovery and return to work. To ensure these changes are understood and implemented effectively, guidance and training on the new definition of mental injury and the application of the work-related stress and burnout exception will be provided to WorkSafe Victoria's agents and self-insurers.

Importantly, workers will continue to have access to provisional payments from the time they lodge a mental injury claim. Provisional payments provide access to early treatment and support through the payment of reasonable medical and like expenses from the time a claim is lodged until the claim is accepted, or where the claim is not accepted, for a total of 13 weeks. In addition to the 13 weeks of provisional payments, workers who have a mental injury claim not accepted will be provided with transitional support, including appropriate support services, return to work support if they have a capacity to do so, or if not, identifying any income replacement services. Workers will also be provided with information on how to dispute a decision they disagree with.

These changes will apply to mental injuries sustained on or after the commencement of the bill. There will be no retrospective application of these changes.

Changes relating to arbitration

The Bill will also amend the **Workplace Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 2013** to provide that initial eligibility disputes, relating to whether a worker is entitled to compensation under that Act, cannot be referred to arbitration. Instead, where conciliation has been unsuccessful, disputes relating to initial eligibility decisions can only be referred and resolved by the Courts. This amendment ensures that disputes relating to initial entitlement, including whether a claim satisfies the new mental injury eligibility criteria, will be determined and heard effectively, and the tests can be applied appropriately. This ensures that decisions relating to eligibility are applied consistently and in accordance with judicial interpretation.

Workers who can currently make an application for review to the Workers Compensation Independent Review Service through WorkSafe Victoria, will continue to be able to make applications regarding initial eligibility decisions following conciliation.

The changes relating to arbitration will apply to a genuine dispute in respect to injuries sustained on or after the commencement of the bill. There will be no retrospective application of these changes.

Weekly payments after the second entitlement period

Since 2015, the number of injured workers remaining on weekly benefits following the expiry of the second entitlement period has increased. In 2015, eight per cent of injured workers received weekly payments after

130 weeks. Recent modelling projects that, in 2023, 18 per cent of claims will continue beyond 130 weeks. The Bill amends the current requirements that need to be satisfied to continue to receive weekly payments after 130 weeks by introducing an additional requirement that the worker must have a permanent whole person impairment of more than 20 per cent for injuries arising from the same event or circumstance. This threshold is in addition to the existing requirement that the worker must be assessed as having no work capacity, and likely to continue indefinitely to have no work capacity.

This amendment will bring Victoria in line with other states and territories that have introduced impairment assessments, as a more objective determination of the impact of a work-related injury. Where a worker has capacity for work or a whole person impairment of 20 per cent or less, their entitlement to weekly compensation payments will end after 130 weeks. The process for assessing permanent impairment for this purpose is consistent with the existing provisions relating to determining a worker's level of permanent impairment for lump sum compensation under the **Workplace Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 2013**.

These reforms are focussed on addressing the long-term financial risk to the Scheme, while ensuring that workers with a significant permanent impairment and an indefinite incapacity for work resulting from their workplace injuries continue to receive support. Those who are no longer eligible to continue to receive weekly payments will be supported to return to work or access other appropriate support or income replacement services, where required.

Workers who are approaching the end of the second entitlement period will be assessed on their degree of permanent whole person impairment for injuries arising out of the same event or circumstance. The determination of permanent impairment for this purpose will be conducted by a qualified independent impairment assessor in accordance with the existing process for assessing impairment under the **Workplace Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 2013**. Where a worker is assessed as having no current work capacity that is likely to continue indefinitely and a whole person impairment of more than 20 per cent, they will continue to receive weekly payments. The existing test of whether a worker has no current work capacity will continue to apply after the second entitlement period.

Acknowledging that some injuries, such as progressive diseases like silicosis and asbestosis, may not stabilise for the purpose of an impairment assessment being undertaken after 130 weeks, the Bill allows for interim entitlement decisions to be made. Where a worker's whole person impairment cannot be assessed because their injury has not stabilised, they are under 18 years old, or there is not enough information to conduct an assessment, subject to certain requirements, WorkSafe Victoria, the agent or the self-insurer can make an interim decision to continue or to cease weekly payments after the end of the second entitlement period.

An interim decision to cease weekly payments can only be made if, following a review of existing medical evidence, WorkSafe Victoria, the agent or self-insurer is satisfied that the injury is not likely to be permanent, save for progressive diseases, and that the whole person impairment is likely to be 20 per cent or less and the worker has a current work capacity. An interim decision to continue weekly payments will be made where WorkSafe Victoria or its agents are satisfied that the worker's impairment is permanent, the impairment is likely to be more than 20 per cent and the worker has no capacity for work indefinitely. Interim decisions will remain in force until a further interim determination is made or WorkSafe Victoria or its agents make an ongoing eligibility determination.

In recognition that these changes could lead to resourcing pressures for independent impairment assessors, provided certain conditions are met, the Bill makes amendments to allow WorkSafe Victoria, its agents or self-insurers to make a determination that it is not necessary or practicable to obtain an assessment of injury for the purposes of a determination of entitlement to continued weekly payments. These administrative decisions are not a determination of a worker's degree of impairment, rather it is a decision that the worker does not need to be assessed by a qualified impairment assessor to determine their entitlement to continue to receive weekly payments after the expiry of the second entitlement period.

An administrative decision can only be made where there are no reasonable prospects of a worker's injury being assessed as below the whole person impairment threshold, such as in the case of catastrophic injuries, or where there is no reasonable prospect of the injury reaching the threshold, such as minor sprains or fractures or standalone back injuries which do not require surgery. The ability for WorkSafe Victoria, its agents or self-insurers to make these decisions will ensure that workers with significant injuries are not required to attend additional assessments and resources are not expended on claims where there is no prospect of the worker remaining eligible for ongoing weekly payments. The Bill provides that these decisions can only be made where there is no disadvantage to the worker.

The Bill also provides that the assessment relating to the degree of impairment obtained from the second entitlement period assessment will be the assessment of impairment used for other purposes under the **Workplace Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 2013**. For example, where a worker has received

an impairment assessment for the purpose of determining entitlement after the second entitlement period, that impairment assessment must also be used where the worker applies for lump sum impairment benefit compensation under the Act or pursues common law damages. These amendments ensure that impairment assessments are applied consistently, and that impairment assessment availability is not depleted by these reforms. An injured worker may choose to initiate a claim for lump sum impairment benefits at the same time as the second entitlement review, or can choose to initiate an impairment benefits claim later, using the same whole person impairment assessment. However, it will not be possible for a worker to pursue an impairment benefits claim at the same time as a review is being undertaken to determine eligibility for weekly payments, post the second entitlement period. It is not the intention that the impairment decision for the purposes of determining entitlement post 130 weeks forces the commencement of an impairment benefits claim. That decision remains the choice of the worker.

The **Workplace Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 2013** currently allows a worker to apply for compensation in the form of weekly payments after the expiry of the second entitlement period in certain circumstances. This application can only be approved if the worker has returned to work for at least 15 hours per week, earns at least \$177 per week and is incapable of undertaking further additional employment due to their injury. Currently, payments continue until the worker ceases to be eligible or the worker's circumstances change. The Bill will amend the **Workplace Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 2013** to include an additional requirement that a worker must also meet the new whole person impairment threshold. The provision will operate in the same way it currently does, but with the whole person impairment threshold as an additional requirement the worker must satisfy. This provision encourages return to work after the second entitlement period while acknowledging that certain injuries will have an ongoing impact on a worker's continued capacity for work and subsequent earning capacity.

The whole person impairment threshold will also apply to workers who cease to reside in Australia. Currently injured workers leaving Australia need to demonstrate that they have no capacity for work indefinitely to continue to receive weekly payments regardless of whether they have exceeded the second entitlement period. The Bill will amend the Act to require these workers to also be assessed as having a whole person impairment of more than 20 per cent after the expiry of the second entitlement period to continue to receive weekly payments.

These changes will apply to injured workers due to reach the end of the second entitlement period on or after the date of commencement. Claims which have already passed the second entitlement period will not be subject to the new test or required to be assessed for impairment.

Section 85(5) of the Constitution Act 1975

Danny PEARSON: I make the following statement under section 85(5) of the Constitution Act 1975 of the reasons why it is the intention of clause 16 to alter or vary section 85 of the Constitution Act 1975. This clause is consistent with existing limitations in the Workplace Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 2013.

Clause 16 introduces section 167J of the Workplace Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 2013 that provides that section 208 of the act applies to determinations relating to a worker's impairment made for the purpose of determining eligibility for weekly payments after the second entitlement period. Section 208 prohibits an appeal to a court or tribunal for a determination as to the degree of permanent impairment. The extension of this limitation ensures that there is consistency in the disputation of decisions relating to permanent impairment and ensures that there is finality in the opinion of the medical panels. This recognises that medical experts are best equipped to ultimately determine medical questions.

Incorporated speech continues:

Information sharing

The Bill also amends the **Workplace Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 2013**, and **Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004** to allow information collected by WorkSafe Victoria under either Act, to be used where reasonably necessary or directly related to a function or purpose of WorkSafe Victoria under any Act that it administers. This change is intended to provide for improved internal information sharing between WorkSafe Victoria's business functions.

These changes will allow for information obtained under WorkSafe Victoria's health and safety function to be used, where appropriate, for a compensation function and vice versa. These changes will require that the use of information only occurs where reasonably necessary for the purpose of performing a function or

exercising a power conferred under an Act that WorkSafe Victoria administers or is directly related to a function or activity conferred on the Authority under the other Act. These changes allow relevant information identified in health and safety activities to inform WorkSafe Victoria's role in administering Victoria's workers' compensation scheme. Similarly, it allows for information obtained in insurance functions to inform WorkSafe Victoria's prevention activities under the **Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004**.

Statutory Review

Finally, the Bill requires the Minister to cause an independent review of the operation of the amendments made by this Bill during the 2027 calendar year. The review must be conducted by a panel of experts with experience in the law, medicine, finance and occupational health and safety in accordance with terms of reference set by the Minister. This independent review will examine all changes made by the Bill, to measure their effectiveness, identify areas for potential improvement and assess the ongoing impact of these changes on the continued operation of the Scheme.

These significant changes to the Scheme included in the Bill seek to ensure the Scheme is appropriate for the modern workplace, capable of facilitating successful return to work outcomes and is financially sustainable, so it can continue to support Victorian workers into the future.

I commend the Bill to the house.

Cindy McLEISH (Eildon) (10:45): I move:

That this debate be adjourned.

Motion agreed to and debate adjourned.

Ordered that debate be adjourned for two weeks. Debate adjourned until Wednesday 15 November.

Early Childhood Legislation Amendment (Premises Approval in Principle) Bill 2023

Second reading

Debate resumed on motion of Ben Carroll:

That the bill be now read a second time.

Jess WILSON (Kew) (10:46): It is a pleasure to rise to speak on the Early Childhood Legislation Amendment (Premises Approval in Principle) Bill 2023 on behalf of the Liberals and Nationals today. This bill seeks to improve early childhood education and child care in this state – two critical areas that are important to Victorian families, teachers and educators, especially in the context of a growing population. As our population grows, we must ensure that access to early childhood education keeps pace with demand, and this bill today goes some way to make it easier to develop new childcare centres across Victoria. But from the outset it must be said there is still much more to do. The bill today is particularly focused on the safety of children, particularly very young children and infants, in childcare settings, which I am certain we can all agree is of paramount importance to us as policymakers.

In terms of my contribution today, I will speak to the background of this bill and how it has come about, looking at the quality framework that is set around early childhood education and childcare centres, the purpose of the bill, some of the key provisions and outcomes of the bill, the stakeholder feedback that we have received as the opposition and also throughout the consultation process in the lead-up to this amendment coming before the Parliament, and briefly the accessibility of childcare services in Victoria. I know my colleagues, particularly my regional colleagues, will speak in detail about some of the examples they have in their own electorates when it comes to a childcare desert and the need for greater services right across Victoria but particularly in regional Victoria and in the growing suburbs in outer Melbourne.

From the outset can I place on record my thanks to the Minister for Children's office, led by Liam in her office, for their assistance with the bill briefing and also with timely advice on a number of questions we put to their office. They were very forthcoming with the information. It always helps us on this side of the house – being able to dive into some of the detail that is not apparent upon reading the bill and some of that background.

This is not a controversial piece of legislation. I think we can all agree on that. It seeks to improve child safety and provide greater certainty for those who are actually looking to invest in the development of childcare centres, and for this reason it is a good example of working cooperatively with the government and with others in this place to achieve greater child safety outcomes for children across Victoria.

I might look at the background to this bill initially. The purpose of this bill is to implement a recommendation of the 2019 national quality framework review. The national quality framework review, or the NQF, was introduced in 2012 as a national system of regulation for the early childhood education and care sector, covering long day care, kindergartens and preschools, family day care and outside school care, and it followed the endorsement of the early childhood development strategy by the Council of Australian Governments in 2009. Prior to the introduction of the NQF, the regulatory responsibility was shared between the Commonwealth and state governments. State regulators had responsibility for the operational regulation, including the licensing and compliance, while the Commonwealth funded the National Childcare Accreditation Council to oversee quality assurance. Standards and processes varied across jurisdictions, and the purpose of the strategy at the time was to ensure that we had much greater consistency across jurisdictions to ensure primarily that regulations around childcare centres and kindergartens met those higher standards, particularly when it came to safety. The legislation that established the NQF passed in the Commonwealth and in each state and territory and included a requirement for five-yearly reviews of the NQF to ensure it is meeting its objectives. The first of these five-yearly reviews was conducted in 2019 and made a number of recommendations for reform to be passed by governments to improve the regulatory framework governing early childhood education care across the country. Those recommendations were endorsed in May 2022 by state and federal education ministers, which led to the introduction of legislation in each parliament to give effect to those recommendations. At the time in this place the Early Childhood Legislation Amendment Bill 2022 was introduced, in August last year. The bill's main purpose then was to amend the Education and Care Services National Law Act 2010, the Children's Services Act 1996 and the Child Wellbeing and Safety (Child Safe Standards Compliance and Enforcement) Amendment Act 2021 to provide for matters relating to the regulatory authority as the integrated sector regulator for education and care services in Victoria. I note that at the time the Liberals and Nationals coalition sought to make a number of amendments to that piece of legislation, but we did not seek to oppose its passage through the Legislative Assembly or the Legislative Council.

While most of the recommendations in the NQF review were given effect last year in the Early Childhood Legislation Amendment Bill 2022, there remained one outstanding recommendation in relation to a particular challenge that is unique to both Victoria and the ACT. The bill before us today, the Early Childhood Legislation Amendment (Premises Approval in Principle) Bill 2023, seeks to implement that outstanding recommendation. Before I go into the detail of that, I do note that the advice provided by the government last week as to why this matter was not dealt with in last year's bill and the amendments that came through at that time was that the government required essentially additional time to design the scheme in question, which is put before us today in this bill, and consult widely on the implementation of this recommendation. The consultation with the early childhood sector and of course the property sector in the building of multistorey childcare centres is essential to the design of the scheme that we are talking about today.

This recommendation in question is in response to issue 3.4 of the NQF review, which was primarily focused on improving children's safety during emergency evacuations from multistorey buildings. For the purposes of this bill a multistorey building is defined as:

a building that has 3 or more storeys (including the ground level ...

My understanding from speaking to the regulator and the department last week is that we do not see that many of the multistorey buildings here in Victoria – of three storeys or more – but there is a growing appetite to look at their placement around Victoria, particularly as we see the demand for childcare services grow.

Of course when you look at multistorey buildings there are unique evacuation risks for children who attend a service housed in a multistorey building, particularly when the premises are located above ground level. Infants and very young children who cannot yet walk independently require longer to evacuate from a building, so it is important then to look at the direct egress outside that building in terms of an evacuation. As a result of this, very specific site planning needs to occur to ensure safety of children during evacuations from childcare centres that are located in these multistorey buildings.

For that reason, the main purposes of the bill today are to amend various pieces of legislation to establish an approval in principle process in participating jurisdictions for certain proposed education and care service premises located in multistorey buildings and other buildings and to make an approval in principle a precondition of service approval for certain education and care services in Victoria and potentially the ACT. It also seeks to amend the Education and Care Services National Law Act to declare that the approval in principle process will apply in Victoria and to enable the minister to declare by order that an approval in principle is a precondition of service in certain cases. Finally, it will amend the Children's Services Act 1996 to establish an approval in principle process for proposed children's services located in multistorey buildings and other buildings and to make certain offences infringement offences.

Turning to the main provisions of the bill, the approval in principle scheme in question is something that the NQF looked at in detail. The description of the problem from the NQF review states:

In Victoria and the ACT, there is a particular problem with new service premises being developed and built that may comply with local planning requirements but may not comply with regulatory requirements under the National Law for the evacuation of young children, non-ambulatory children and infants, when the approved provider applies for service approval.

The review goes on to recommend that in Victoria and the ACT governments:

Amend service approval processes to require approved providers wishing to operate a centre-based service from premises in a multi-storey building ... to apply to the regulatory authority for pre-approval of development and building plans for the proposed premises prior to development and construction.

This bill largely gives effect to this recommendation. Although I note the scheme that is being proposed here today is voluntary rather than compulsory as per the recommendation – and I will come back to that in more detail – it does provide that opportunity for builders, developers and childcare centre proponents to look at the design requirements pre build; ensure that they meet the requirements if it is a multistorey building around evacuation, child safety requirements and regulatory requirements; and ensure that those designs are approved pre build. Then down the track, when the service provider is looking for the regulatory approval to run the childcare service, the development of the building and the design of the building is not going to be a barrier to that.

In establishing a scheme that allows developers, builders or education and care service providers to obtain an approval in principle from the regulatory authority for a centre-based service proposed to be built or renovated in a multistorey building, this bill establishes a process by which the regulatory authority – which is the quality and regulation division, the QARD, at the Department of Education – can participate early enough in the development process to ensure relevant safety standards are taken into account during the design phase of a new multistorey building or planned renovation where a childcare centre will be housed.

New section 109 outlines the matters the regulatory authority must consider in determining an application for approval in principle, including the suitability of the proposed education service premises once the construction, alteration or repair works are completed and the site and location of those premises for the operation of an education service; whether the proposed education and care service premises would meet the approval in principle criteria once the construction, alteration or repair works are completed; and whether the proposed education and care service premises, once constructed, altered or repaired, will have direct egress to an assembly area to allow for the safe evacuation of all children. This is reflective of the recommendations of the 2019 national quality

framework review and looks to address those risks posed by the need to safely evacuate children from premises in multistorey buildings. More broadly the authority can consider any other matter it considers relevant to the design of the building.

Importantly, new section 110 provides that on receiving an application for an approval in principle, the regulatory authority may grant or refuse to grant an approval in principle, but it is required to make a decision on an application within 60 days after the application is received. The bill providing that time frame – the 60-day time frame – will ensure that developers and builders have certainty of time around their application going into the regulatory authority, ensuring that time is not lost. We know that across the board in our planning system every day lost waiting for planning approval to come through for a build is costly, and ultimately that cost flows through to investment decisions either being withheld or being pulled back or it flows through to the consumer in higher costs at the end of the day. That 60-day time frame will ensure that the developer, the builder and the childcare centre proponent have some sense of certainty that they will get an answer within a designated time period – a short time period – when it comes to the planning system more broadly and will be able to determine whether they can commence their build quickly after that application is received and whether it is granted or refused or varied dependent on the design factors.

Also, the bill ensures that an approval in principle provides the approval in principle holder with the assurance that an application for service after the build at the premises cannot be then declined on the basis that it does not meet those physical requirements. This goes to some of the issues at the heart of this bill, in that those service providers that were going to look to get the service approval at the end of the day from the regulator were then having the design issues come up. This looks to ensure that once approval in principle is obtained, that then cannot be a barrier down the track. Of course the bill ensures that any adverse decisions by the regulatory authority are reviewable, and that is a review in terms of both internal and external.

The creation of this scheme is undoubtedly a good thing, because it means safety considerations for children are understood and accounted for from the very beginning of the construction. It also acts as an important consultation service for builders and developers or providers who wish to provide a service from a multistorey premises, who will be able to rely more heavily on the regulatory authority for preapproval of development and building plans for the proposed premises prior to development and construction.

I know from speaking to the regulatory authority in the department last week that often questions are asked of them. They can provide advice at the moment, but this will provide a greater certainty around the approval in principle scheme to ensure that once approved the builder can get on with the job with the build and design knowing that it cannot be a barrier to service approval down the track. It will essentially provide proponents with clarity and confidence that the physical design and construction of the premises will meet the regulatory criteria when that service for approval is sought post construction. This improved clarity for the industry will surely improve investor confidence when deciding to build and operate an early childhood centre or care centre, which will be critical to ensuring we can meet the growing demand for childcare services in Victoria in the coming years and decades.

I do note, as I said earlier, that the scheme is voluntary and that the government is not intending to make it a requirement for regulatory approval at this stage. The government has advised that there is no plan or intention to make this scheme mandatory and it will assess the extent to which the voluntary process addresses the suitability of future multistorey premises for early childhood premises. The understanding at this stage is the scheme will potentially be accessed by 10 to 15 providers each year – working through the detail of the scheme and working out, as more and more builders and developers and childcare centre providers come to look at the scheme and try to access the scheme, how that can be improved and look at that down the track if there is any need to make it a requirement beforehand.

We on this side of the house support a voluntary scheme that builders can opt to enter to make sure that the industry is working through the detail and that it is not being mandated by government.

Certainly strengthening that administrative support and guidance from the regulator will be of assistance in seeking to establish new childcare services in multistorey premises that are compliant with relevant childcare safety regulations.

The bill does give the minister the option of making this a mandatory process via ministerial order. This is a responsibility of the Minister for Children in consultation with the minister responsible for administering the Building Act 1993, and if the government does intend to shift this scheme from voluntary to mandatory, the coalition would certainly expect it to consult widely with the early childhood sector as well as the construction and property industries before taking that step.

We on this side of the house sought feedback on this bill from the early childhood sector and from the property sector and industry representatives, and no significant concerns have been raised about the concept of an approval in principle scheme for centres housed in multistorey buildings. I note that the national quality framework review, which actually prompted this piece of legislation, has broad stakeholder support and reflects the consentient position of all states and territories and the Commonwealth. In recognition of this, we on this side of the house – the coalition – will be supporting this legislation, because we do believe it will improve the safety of children in early childhood education and childcare centres across Victoria while also providing that certainty for builders, developers and childcare centre proponents to be able to build new multistorey childcare centres knowing that if approved prior to construction, if the design is approved and the approval is given in principle, when they seek service approval after the construction is completed, that will be granted based on their pre-build and that design requirements will not be an issue in that process.

With the time I have left, I thought I would touch briefly on accessibility of childcare services in Victoria. I know my colleagues on this side of the house will speak to this in more detail through their contributions today, and particularly some examples from their own electorates where families are struggling to access child care. We know that lack of access to child care takes almost 27,000 women entirely out of the workforce in Victoria and costs our economy about \$1.5 billion a year in lost earnings alone. In previous roles I have had looking at the economic participation impact of a lack of childcare services, this is something that I have been very passionate about – how we can make sure that more and more women in particular are able to access the workforce by being able to access childcare support. Not being to access child care is a significant cost to these women, who are essentially going to be forgoing wages that could help them get ahead and help their family get ahead, and of course it is a hit to our economy, which misses out on the productivity and skills that these women have to offer.

It is worth noting that over 50 per cent of women who say they want to do more paid work say lack of access to affordable child care is the main barrier preventing them from taking on more hours. I think it is very concerning that a 2022 study found that having a baby opens up a 55 per cent pay gap for Australian women in the workplace compared to their male colleagues in the first five years after childbirth. As the member for Euroa just said, this is very true and it is something you hear consistently – starting a family, having young children and then wanting to get back into the workforce but it simply not stacking up financially to do so. With around 94 per cent of primary carers being women, this issue does make it harder and harder for women to get back into the workforce compared to their male colleagues and counterparts.

Lack of access to childcare services reinforces traditional gender roles, as women who may want to work are more often obliged to stay at home, work part-time or take lower paid jobs closer to home in order to look after their children. They may also look at taking other lower paid jobs or taking less opportunities to increase their hours because of the way the childcare system and particularly the subsidies at a federal level work, acting as that disincentive to take on extra hours, tipping you over a certain threshold and therefore it becoming financially unviable to actually do more work or look at moving up the ranks in your workplace.

Not only are there the issues around women's participation in the workforce, but the benefits of early childhood education for children are essential to making sure we have greater access to early childhood education and child care right around the state. We know that children in grade 3 who went to kinder were 15 to 20 weeks ahead of those who did not, and by age 16, students who attended two or more years of kindergarten will have better cognitive and social skills, higher exam scores, better social and emotional outcomes and are more likely to go on to higher academic study. We know that there is a benefit when it comes to increasing economic participation, particularly for women. We know there are benefits for children when it comes to ensuring they have access to early childhood education and child care. So it is absolutely essential that we actually increase the access to early childhood and childcare education. But unfortunately, as we on this side of the house often highlight, we have serious accessibility and availability issues in Victoria.

The Mitchell Institute at Victoria University published a report last year that refers to 'childcare deserts' across Australia, and I know my colleagues on this side of the house regularly speak to this issue in their own electorates, particularly in regional Victoria. Their findings were very, very alarming. Around 9 million Australians, or 35 per cent of the population, live in a neighbourhood they classify as a childcare desert, with the definition of a desert being an area where there are more than three children per one available childcare place. I was just speaking to the member for South-West Coast before this, where that exact issue was highlighted. A family in Warrnambool was looking to make sure that the mother could increase her ability to get to work, with the father also in a job that required significant travel, and they were looking to find access to childcare services in Warrnambool, which would make it much easier for the family to be able to ensure that they can get to work on time and they can work longer hours. But childcare services do not always meet the needs of families, particularly those working on shift work or in emergency services, and they simply do not have the available places. The child in question is on every waitlist in Warrnambool, and they simply cannot find access to a childcare centre, let alone find a childcare centre that would actually meet their needs as a family – the need for outside hours care – to ensure that the family itself can continue working and can increase their opportunity to work. But they simply cannot find access to that child care.

What the Mitchell Institute report highlighted – and it is something we on this side know very clearly is unfortunately not being addressed – is that child care is far scarcer in regional areas than in metropolitan Melbourne but also in the growth areas of the metropolitan area where infrastructure is simply not keeping up with the growing population. It is incredibly important that we look to increase access to childcare services. Unfortunately what we have seen from this government is the announcement of 50 new childcare centres to be up and running by 2028 but only identified target areas for 30 of them and specific sites for only four of them. 2028 is not that far away. In fact we need the places now for child care, but with the sites not even identified, there is a long way to go to actually rolling out this program and delivering it.

When the government announced their Best Start, Best Life policy with much fanfare, it was very apparent very quickly that it is frustratingly light on the detail as to when it will actually be implemented. When we have families in regional Victoria not being able to access childcare services now, we have a serious problem with what that means for the benefits to those children and the ability of those families to get back into the workforce and increase their financial security.

Throughout the fanfare and the big announcement of the Best Start, Best Life policy we have seen issues around the announcement of free kinder. Now, the government does not like to acknowledge that their so-called free kinder funding does not actually meet the needs of those kindergartens to cover their costs. But back when they introduced that policy the department itself actually acknowledged that many dozens of standalone kindergartens across Victoria would be financially worse off as a result of the scheme, with the department telling many kindergartens – around 10 per cent – that they would be worse off under the new funding arrangement. We on this side of the house regularly hear from local kindergartens that they are going to struggle to keep their doors open as a result of this policy,

and we have yet to see how the government will help manage the rollout and the funding requirements of this policy to ensure that we do not see the closure of these kindergarten centres.

Just before I finish, one of the other key issues in this space is ensuring that we have the workforce to actually meet the growth of the number of childcare centres we need. We know that we have a workforce that is struggling, and we know that we have a lack of early educators available and a lack of staff available for these childcare centres. That goes to many of the issues in regional Victoria, where it is all right to announce the funding and the construction of new childcare centres, but if we do not have the staff to actually fill them and to provide the services, that is going to be a big problem.

The coalition will support the bill before us today. It is a bill that seeks to ensure that child safety is paramount in our childcare centres. It is a bill that ensures that there is greater certainty for those seeking to invest in more childcare centres – something that we need desperately in Victoria to see the growth of childcare centres. They will have greater certainty when it comes to the construction, knowing that if they receive that approval in principle prior to build and it is approved, then when it comes to the service approval, that will not be a barrier to receiving that approval. So we commend this bill to the house. I look forward to my colleagues in their contributions highlighting many of the access issues. While we support this bill, there is still much more to do to actually increase access to child care in Victoria.

Melissa HORNE (Williamstown – Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation, Minister for Local Government, Minister for Ports and Freight, Minister for Roads and Road Safety) (11:16): It gives me enormous pleasure to rise to speak on the Early Childhood Legislation Amendment (Premises Approval in Principle) Bill 2023, and I would really like to commend and congratulate the Minister for Children in the other place and the former Minister for Early Childhood and Pre-Prep, who have done a power of work to be able to bring such a comprehensive bill that will be such a game changer in the way that we deliver early childhood services across the state.

This really builds on the Best Start, Best Life program, and we know that those first 1000 days of a child's life are absolutely critical to setting them up for the best start in life and into the future. We are following through on the recommendations that were agreed to in the education ministers meeting regarding the 2019 national quality framework review to establish a premises approval in principle scheme for kinders in multistorey buildings, ensuring completed premises and buildings meet the regulatory requirement to protect the safety of our children.

This bill not only reduces the risk to our kids in the event of an emergency and ensures kinders in multistorey buildings are still high-quality educational environments but also reduces the red tape for builders by granting approval in principle to designs. Acting Speaker Hamer, as you would know, Victoria leads the nation in early childhood education, and as a government we have committed \$14 billion to expanding kinder programs across the state. We are delivering the \$270 million free kinder for all three- and four-year-olds. We are also taking steps to establish pre-prep over the next decade. We know how integral early learning is to our kids' development, which is why we are giving our kids the best start in life.

We have also got 50 government-owned kinders that are government owned and operated early learning centres. This is an initiative that is an ambitious plan to address childcare shortages in the areas of greatest need. Certainly I know that struggle is real. As I travel around regional Victoria in particular I see there are those childcare deserts, so being able to put those early learning centres into areas where there has not been that provision is so fundamentally vital.

Where possible those early learning centres will be co-located with schools to avoid that double drop-off. In some places they may be co-located with services like maternal and child health services and playgroups. I can speak firsthand about just how important those sorts of services are, because they exist in Newport, in my electorate of Williamstown. We have got the Newport Gardens Early Years Centre, which was built adjacent to the primary school there. That gives incredible transitional services

to those kids that are at the kinder. They can look out the window and see the kids in the primary school playing in the yards. It is fantastic actually for parents to be able to do that single drop-off and pick-up and really helps the transition as those kids move out of four-year-old kinder and straight into prep. It is a terrific centre, and it is something that this government is proud to continue to support. With this ambitious reform we recently passed a bill to enable the minister to acquire land to deliver kindergartens and the 50 government owned and operated early learning centres, and the first four centres will open in 2025, with a further 26 locations announced. I know how excited the Minister for Children in the other place is to be able to deliver that.

Free kinder: under our government we have made kinder free. This year is a significant year in delivering on this reform, with the government's \$270 million free kinder initiative. It is available to all three- and four-year-olds enrolled in participating funded kinder programs, and it will save families a significant amount – up to \$2500 in fees per child – each year. And with a cost-of-living crisis, that is certainly money well kept in families' pockets.

In the last few minutes that are left in this contribution I would like to actually give a bit of a shout-out to some of the investments that this government is delivering into kindergartens in and around the electorate of Williamstown. We have got a brand new kindergarten being built at Sutton Avenue in Altona North. This is part of a Building Blocks grant, part of that \$10 million investment, and it will build a new two-room modular kinder for 66 kids in the local area. Certainly Altona North is a growing suburb, with many young families moving into the area, and that will be a much-needed resource.

The iconic Robina Scott, which has a three-year-old kinder and another four-year-old kinder right in the heart of Williamstown, has had \$180,000 invested in it. This has been able to provide flexible learning spaces for additional places and upgraded playgrounds for all abilities. I was down there not long ago, and it certainly looks fantastic.

The Range Children's Centre is another kinder in Williamstown, out on Kororoit Creek Road, and that has the most marvellous upgraded outdoor area, which is about safer play and a restored garden. It is a kindergarten, and their outdoor play areas are all with natural rather than plastic furniture. It is timber, it is rocks, it is beautifully landscaped, and the kids just absolutely love it. The Newport Gardens Early Years Centre has had a Building Blocks capacity grant for \$600,000, which has expanded that centre in preparation for free kinder.

Home Road kinder in the heart of Newport has had investment after investment after investment. Their playgroup activities have also been expanded for all-abilities kids, and it looks simply fantastic. South Kingsville Pre School, which is part of South Kingsville Community Centre, has had a Building Blocks improvement grant of \$170,000. It has got this gorgeous multisensory inclusive play space and has also expanded the occasional care rooms and bathrooms. And of course there is One Tree in Altona North, which has had \$600,000 as part of a Building Blocks capacity grant, and that has allowed it to expand to provide an additional 40 places. Finally, there is Seaholme kindy, which is being delivered by Hobsons Bay City Council, and that is building a new two-room modular building which will allow for an additional 66 kinder places.

Finally, we know that free kinder is a transformative experience and that providing this early childhood learning is absolutely vital to our children, so I would like to give a shout-out to the local government sector, who continue to invest and who continue to be able to support childcare services, because those councils that are stepping away from this are denying many families in their area that vital service. I will leave my contribution there.

Emma KEALY (Lowan) (11:25): I rise today to speak on the Early Childhood Legislation Amendment (Premises Approval in Principle) Bill 2023. As we just heard from the Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation at the table, there are many challenges but great opportunities as well when it comes to addressing some of the issues in child care. We know, and I have mentioned in this place many, many times, that in my electorate of Lowan we are in a childcare desert. There

simply are insufficient childcare facilities. There are insufficient childcare staff, our early educators, to meet the demand for childcare support services for our young children and our families, who rely so heavily on them. I know of so many people in my local area who have been forced to quit their jobs or return to work in a reduced capacity or they are choosing or having to work night shift, so they never see their partner, just to keep their jobs, to keep food on the table and to ensure that there is care for their children. In one childcare centre in Horsham alone there are 200 families on the waitlist. Only five new families have been offered places for this coming year, and this is the largest childcare centre in Horsham. We are at critical breaking point when it comes to offering childcare support.

I note the previous government speaker referenced the free TAFE program, but unfortunately it is not delivering the number of childcare workers that we need. It sounds good and it looks good in media releases, but at the end of the day we need increased capacity to make sure that we are training more early educators, to make sure that we have got more people in the system and also to make sure that there are sufficient supports in place to keep people in the sector. One of the biggest issues in my electorate is that the pressures that are on early educators are just so great that people are taking those skills and working in alternative areas. They are dropping out of those supports for child care and for kindergarten, supporting our youngest people get the best possible start to life, simply because they are in a work environment where they are not well supported. Until the government has something beyond the slogan of free TAFE, until we see a policy from the government that actually results in a significant increase in the net number of childcare workers in the state of Victoria and until we see from this government a policy which works to attract and retain childcare workers to rural and regional areas of the state, then we are simply not going to see a reversal of this. The consequence of the government failing to take action, to take on and seriously consider the implications of the critical early educator workforce shortages across the state, is very, very disappointing, and it is having an impact on so many Victorian families.

Earlier this week I met with the Financial Counselling Victoria group. There is an increasing number of young families who are unable to keep up with their childcare fees. They are just not able to pay them. This is something occurring across all the cost pressures that young families have. As the cost of living escalates across the state, it is not just increases in mortgage payments, it is not just increases in energy bills, it is not just grocery prices going up, it is not just rego and licensing going up – it is the school fees going up, everything. Everywhere people turn the cost of living is going up under Labor. They are getting behind on their childcare payments. For young families who rely on two incomes – and generally what I am hearing from financial counsellors is that it is these young families who are coming for help – they are people who have got mortgages and both parents work. These are people who otherwise would probably be seen as people who are not financially vulnerable, but they are coming for support at that critical point where they are at financial breaking point.

For parents, and usually it is the mum, when you cannot afford childcare payments and you fall behind on your payments and the childcare operator says ‘I’m sorry, we can’t have your child stay at our centre any longer’, then there is a position forced upon those families that one of the parents has to stop work, and generally it is a burden that falls on the mum. We know that we have so many workforces, particularly in the health sector, that are female-dominated industries. If mothers are more often forced to stay home to look after children because they cannot afford child care, then it is going to put additional pressure on other workforces that are critically short across our state. It also of course just puts that spiral in there again. If a family who cannot afford, with two incomes, child care is then put in a position where they lose one of those incomes, it is only going to put even more pressure on that family who are trying to give a young one the best possible start to life – to keep a roof over their head and keep food on the table – and we need to address that urgently.

There is a critical shortage of financial counsellors across the state. Calls to the debt helpline in Victoria have increased by 47 per cent in the past year. This is well above the Australian average of a 23 per cent increase. In Victoria people are really, really hurting with the cost of living absolutely skyrocketing. In my local region of Horsham Carly Baker does an exceptional job. She covers an

enormous region, from Geelong right through to Mildura. The demand for her services just continues to increase. She has about 40 to 50 families on her waitlist; many of those are struggling to keep up with childcare costs. She is at the point where people are waiting for nine weeks, and the service have actually had to close their books to new families getting financial support. This will have critical consequences for people if they cannot get financial support when they need it.

There is a solution that has been put forward – that is, that the government provides funding for more financial counsellors across the state. It is not a big ask. Ten financial counsellors is what Financial Counselling Victoria are asking for. They want 10 financial counsellors across the state, which is a cost of about \$1.5 million a year. They want it for three years over this peak time because they know that the cost of living is only going to get harder under Labor. I urge the government to consider supporting these families who are trying desperately to keep their children in child care, because the alternative would be disastrous, not just for the parents but also for their children. They will not be given the opportunity to get the best possible start to life. Further to that, it will just exacerbate the critical workforce shortages that are existing particularly in rural and regional Victoria. It is of course a very, very difficult decision for childcare operators to say ‘You haven’t paid for three to six months. We simply can’t afford to have you in our centre any longer’.

Our childcare operators are doing an incredible job under very difficult circumstances. I have not mentioned them all before, but Mel, Jodie and the team provide fabulous childcare support for my little girl, and many of the same people offered support and childcare education to my young boy. I very much appreciate everything that they do. They are working so hard. They have created a food bank within their childcare centre, where you can drop in food for parents that maybe cannot go to the Christian Emergency Food Centre or have not got friends or relatives that they can rely on just to grab some food, nappies, formula or whatever it might be. I really commend the way that they are trying their best to support as many families as possible, but it should not just be up to them. It should be a responsibility of government as well to ensure that families are never having to choose between putting food on the table and keeping their job or sending their children to child care. They should never, ever be in that position.

In summary, I urge the government to address child care in three ways. One I realise is extraneous, but it is still very important. We need to ensure that the government has a policy which looks to train more childcare workers not just by offering a free course but by expanding courses. We need to see programs in place that will better attract childcare workers to rural and regional Victoria but also provide a positive workplace where they are able to be retained in rural and regional Victoria. I also ask the government to consider the impacts of their financial decisions, their mismanagement of the state’s finances, the pressure burden and cost-of-living expenses, which are going through the roof for so many families, and to fund 10 additional financial counsellors to support families who are most at need, particularly those families who cannot afford to pay their childcare bills and who are being forced to remove their children from child care and resign from their jobs. There are opportunities. There is an opportunity to support Victorians better, and I urge the government to consider these options, because that would make a world of difference for families who are very much struggling with cost-of-living pressures under this Labor government.

Martha HAYLETT (Ripon) (11:35): I rise to speak on the Early Childhood Legislation Amendment (Premises Approval in Principle) Bill 2023. I could talk about the topic of early childhood education all day. I am so proud of the work our Labor government is doing to make sure every young Victorian has the best start in life. As the Minister for Local Government noted earlier, the key purpose of the bill is to put into practice a recommendation agreed to by the education ministers meeting for the 2019 national quality framework review. As part of the review, Commonwealth, state and territory education ministers agreed to a number of outcomes aimed at improving children’s health, safety and wellbeing. Importantly, each of those outcomes were informed by those who know the issue best: parents, families and workers within the education and care sector themselves. This bill gives effect to one of the review’s recommendations – establishing a premises approval in principle scheme for new

early childhood services in multistorey buildings. By providing approval in principle, these changes ensure that applicants will have confidence that designs of their proposed premises meet the necessary standards defined under the national quality framework, including those aimed squarely at protecting the safety of young children in emergency evacuations.

Importantly, the proposed changes in this bill will also improve the early childhood services approval process for services in new or altered multistorey buildings, saving applicants time and money. It also reflects the changing nature of early childhood education and care in our nation. Whilst less than 1 per cent of early childhood services are currently located in multistorey buildings, and 0 per cent in my own electorate of Ripon, we know that as our population grows and as the needs of families change, our approach needs to change too. That is certainly the belief and record of our government. Under our watch Victoria is leading the nation on early childhood education and care. At the heart of that effort is our \$14 billion commitment to transforming kinder across our state. Already we have made kinder free for three- and four-year-old Victorian children. This means a saving of up to \$2500 per child each year, providing massive relief for family budgets – 2500 bucks; that is incredible. It will also enable more than 28,000 Victorians to return to work, with more than 26,000 of them being women.

Our rollout of three-year-old kinder is also continuing, with every child in Victoria now able to access at least 5 hours a week of early childhood education. This will only get better, with all Victorian families progressively able to benefit from 30 hours of free pre-prep each week over the next 10 years. Many families in my electorate will be the first to enjoy this nation-leading reform, with kinder transitioning to pre-prep and being delivered in the Northern Grampians shire and the Ararat Rural City Council areas first in 2025 before other council areas progressively join the rollout in the following years. I know that the communities of Ararat and St Arnaud are so excited about pre-prep coming to them first. We know how important early learning is to a child's development, so vulnerable children living outside these initial areas will also be eligible from 2026. It will have a profound impact on kids' lives forever, giving them the best building blocks to succeed into the future. It will also be a game changer for so many young families across my electorate who raise the issue of early learning with me constantly. It comes up everywhere I go.

Thankfully our plan to establish 50 government-owned and operated early learning centres will also make a big difference. Focused firmly on addressing childcare shortages in communities that need it most, these new centres will mean the local families can have confidence that there will be an available place for their little ones. In Ripon it means a brand new childcare facility in the Creswick–Clunes area, in Maryborough and in the Loddon shire. Wherever possible, these new centres will be co-located with schools, enabling parents to ditch the dreaded double drop-off. In other instances they will be co-located with services like maternal and child health care and playgroups, providing a central and joined-up spot for local families.

Currently there are absolutely no childcare options in Clunes and absolutely no childcare centres in the whole of the Loddon shire, and there is a 12-month waiting list for child care in Maryborough. Mums and dads cannot go back to work as a result, and it is being felt at our local hospitals, schools, councils, supermarkets and other workplaces. It is also impacting our rural and regional kids' development as they are not around other kids their age and learning all together. Our action as a government will change this. We had to step in as we were sick of waiting for the federal Abbott, Turnbull and Morrison governments to do anything about early childhood education. For families it means doubling the number of funded kinder hours from 15 to 30 a week, and for our kids it means even more opportunity to learn and play and grow. It is a hugely ambitious reform, but as with so many of our government's big ideas, we are not wasting a moment in delivering it.

We are also expanding kinders in the growing outer areas of Ballarat in my electorate. In Haddon we are delivering a massive \$2.7 million upgrade of the Haddon Kindergarten. It will mean 50 more kids can join free kinder locally and have the very best start in life. We are also building a brand new kindergarten at Napoleons Primary School with two classrooms and an outdoor learning area. The

kinder will mean 66 more local kids can benefit from the service, and having the kinder and school all together will avoid that double drop-off and help kids have a smoother transition into primary school.

We are doing so much to improve early childhood education in this state. I am so proud to be on this side of the chamber delivering results for our rural and regional communities. I know how much of a difference this is going to have. Mums in Wedderburn and Inglewood in the Loddon shire regularly talk to me about how they have got to lock up the kids in the car while they are working on the farm to make sure that they do not walk around the machinery or they have got to have the kids in a playpen in the butchers shop because there is absolutely no child care right now, and that is not okay. That is what the government is addressing to ensure that we build more government-run childcare centres for those childcare deserts in our rural and regional areas where they are needed most. I know that this comes up in St Arnaud, and they are so excited about getting their pre-prep modular buildings. In Ararat they are so excited about pre-prep as well. In Maryborough one of my staff is pregnant herself, and some of her friends said 'You'd better get them on the waiting list already for child care'. We know that is absolutely not okay and we want to fix that issue, and we on this side of the chamber are.

I would also like to take the opportunity to give a shout-out to all our early childhood educators, who do a phenomenal job. I have had the pleasure of meeting many of them over the past year, including the incredible staff at the Clunes and District Preschool, Creswick and District Preschool, Ararat Early Learning Centre and Journey Early Learning Centre in Lucas. I am looking forward to travelling around and meeting all of the staff and the kids at all of our learning centres across Ripon. They go above and beyond for our little Victorians, and I could not be more grateful for all that they do. We are also supporting their work with \$5000 for every single early centre across Victoria to purchase more toys – which is very, very happy days – and free kinder kits for every little one as well.

This bill is just a part of that reform, supporting the delivery of the infrastructure required for our landmark Best Start, Best Life program and ensuring that all early childhood services in Victoria operate under the same regulatory requirements. We are not wasting a moment in getting this done and making a change to reform our early learning sector in Victoria – because as I said, we were sick of waiting for the federal government to do anything about it when the Liberals and Nationals were in control. I commend the bill to the house.

Roma BRITNELL (South-West Coast) (11:44): I rise to speak on the Early Childhood Legislation Amendment (Premises Approval in Principle) Bill 2023, a bill that sets up a voluntary approval scheme so that childcare centres in multistorey buildings can get approval, according to the government, to make childcare centres more accessible and to improve safety. We support this bill because of course we want to make sure that safety is paramount for children in childcare settings and we want to improve accessibility, and that is a very big issue in South-West Coast. While this bill is I think very Melbourne-centric – because it is multistorey focused and talks to, as we heard in the bill briefing, around 10 buildings a year that will be affected by this bill – in the meantime I see in South-West Coast a significant crisis in child care. We are a childcare desert declared area, and there is not a day that goes by that I do not have parents calling me, asking for a solution to be put forward.

I have been listening to the members on the other side of the chamber talk about all the work the government is doing to address the childcare issues. Well, they need to address the issue now, not in four, five or six years time. Three-year-old kinder is a terrific concept – and one we backed before the election – but it is one that has been brought in by this government with no planning and no ability to carry it out in a responsible way. In fact what it has done is add to the childcare crisis in south-west Victoria. We all understand the importance of early education, and there is a lot of evidence saying that from nought to three the more education a child gets the better the outcomes are for them, both socially and academically. But the reality of the situation is that when we have got children on waiting lists for child care and day care and all the services that help parents when they need to go to work, three-year-old kinder has just put children whose parents had them at home into that system. That has led to less supply and more demand. It is fantastic to have it, but we did not have the planning in place,

nor staff trained or extra staff available, nor the infrastructure for that take place in. In the regions it has caused a lot more pressure and problems.

I am experienced in the area of childcare as a parent. I have four children, and each one of them was in child care. I have used in-venue care and I have used family day care. As a shiftworker it was very difficult to use a childcare centre that had fixed hours. My shifts would start at 7 in the morning or 3 in the afternoon and go to 11 at night. They are difficult times for childcare centres that operate from 8 to 5 or 6. This is what the parents are saying to me: the childcare centres are full, waiting lists go for at least two years, and for shift workers the systems and the rules around family day care are not flexible enough.

In a recent sitting I put forward a motion to the chamber asking the government to look at having an inquiry to bring the federal government and the state government together so we can look at ways to make child care flexible and available. At the moment, for example, a family day care mum, as I always call them, can start a centre in their own home, but they cannot be registered in anyone else's home. Now, if a home is safe and child safety is not compromised, that system is probably not flexible enough to work in different situations. There are regulations that are monitored by the state that could be looked at, and the federal government subsidies, for example, could be looked at to be made more portable. If you have got a family who is in an area that is out of town and they have got a lady up the road who is prepared to come into their home, which they know is safe, she should fit the criteria for being paid under the subsidy scheme, or if you have not got enough people, which we see in the regions, and someone from overseas is encouraged to come over and work as an au pair, then that au pair should be able to be eligible. There are all sorts of ideas that have come to my office from parents who are in dire situations. The cost of living is increasing, and many of these families have mortgages that they are trying to meet the repayments on with interest rates going up. They were expecting to be out of the workforce for some months to a year, not three, four or five years, which is what they are finding with the long waiting lists. We need to assist these families now. I get emails regularly. I will quote from some of the emails that I have been given. This is one that says:

I have had our daughter on the waiting list since I was three months pregnant, down at every childcare centre within a 56km radius of our home, which is up to an hour travel time one way. During this time, for example, at one centre we have only moved from 69th to 65th on the waiting list. Our choices are:

1. Delay my return to work causing us financial strain ...
2. Hire a private nanny ...

that cannot be subsidised, so it will not work, and it is possibly too much for her husband and her to continue to work. These are really difficult situations for families. This one says:

With interest rates rising it is fairly challenging trying to keep up with the home loan when only one of us is working full-time and the other is unable to work more than one day a week.

A detective recently contacted me. She lives out of town. She is having to pay someone to go and pick up her child, because detectives work shiftwork and the childcare centre that she has her child in can only take the child three days a week. This particular detective said to me that their shifts are down, because they are understaffed in the regions in the police force, so she is letting her colleagues down. It is no longer as it was perhaps in my era, where it was my problem to find the solution. I think it is now a community problem. In the forum I held recently we had police officers, ambulance officers, teachers and nurses all saying they could not go back to work because they could not get anyone to care for their children.

I had a doctor recently who has a practice – she and three nurses all have children – who wanted to set up a family day care in her practice, but as I said earlier, the regulations around that do not allow someone to set up in somebody else's home – and it was not a home; it was a clinical practice. But in those areas, as long as they are safe, surely we can find a way to have a bespoke model that makes sure there is someone that comes along and looks at them and approves them so they can fit within the model. That is what I think an inquiry would be able to look at – putting forward a way that these

regulations and the subsidy can be re-looked at so we can find solutions for families today. As many of these emails say, they cannot wait two to three years, and the waitlist just grows. We see the impact on our economy with the recent study that shows that 26,000 people are out of the workforce due to lack of childcare availability, which is costing our economy \$1.5 billion per annum.

In South-West Coast we have a workforce shortage, so we are desperate for more people. We are also struggling with a housing crisis. If you put a childcare crisis on top of that, there is no way we can find a solution without the government coming in, sitting down and doing this inquiry, as I suggested in the Parliament, which the government shut down before we even were allowed to begin debate – because there are solutions. If we can solve the childcare crisis, we can encourage people to come to the region. I had a teacher that came to the region who could not access child care, and they said ‘Well, we were encouraged to come to the region and assisted to do so, but if we can’t have support for our family, we’re going to have to leave’. This is quite dire. One email said:

... childcare centres in Portland and the surrounding areas have informed me that they do not have any available positions and are not looking at vacancies until 2024. This is unacceptable and places me in an untenable position of having to end my career and rely on Government support ... an option I cannot and will not fathom.

This is from a single mother with a chronic health issue who actually works in the area of housing. She is a town planner, from memory when I read this – and I may have that wrong, because I cannot find it right here. But that is the sort of person we actually need right now in the regions to help us with our housing crisis. We cannot fix this problem if we do not start with child care. An inquiry was a suggestion I made. I asked the government to revisit that suggestion. There are solutions. The families know them. We cannot continue with this childcare desert, but we can fix it today.

Nathan LAMBERT (Preston) (11:54): I also rise to support the Early Childhood Legislation Amendment (Premises Approval in Principle) Bill 2023. As the member for Kew noted at the top of today’s debate, this bill has its origins in the national framework that we have to regulate early childhood education and care for the vast majority of our service providers. For various kinds of interesting constitutional and operational reasons, the legislative parts of that national framework are of course implemented by the states and territories separately. There is a national law, which everyone agrees to, but then it forms a schedule to the Victorian act, and the act turns on various bits.

This bill that we have here in front of us today, as we know, mainly amends that national law in part 2 but then also has a shorter bit in part 3 that amends our own act. I think the member for Kew also noted that that national framework came into place in 2012. I will just note that it was the Rudd–Gillard Labor government that introduced the national quality framework, a fine government, led at the time by then minister Kate Ellis, a fine minister who I note is the same age as me and has managed to have a very impressive career, implement all these reforms and happily retire before some of us even got into Parliament. As other speakers have noted, there is a five-yearly process for reviewing the national quality framework, and it was the 2019 review that set in train the various decisions that led to the bill we have in front of us today.

Other speakers have noted that the government last year – those of us elected last year were not here, but those who were in the previous government were – passed the Early Childhood Legislation Amendment Bill 2022, which implemented most of the recommendations from the 2019 review, but this piece of legislation today deals with the last outstanding recommendation. I understand that it is a little bit more complex and there was some further stakeholder consultation to be done, so not wanting to hold up the earlier reforms, many of which have now come into effect, we held it over to this bill that we have today.

It is probably fair to say that in this place we talk about some very general things sometimes and then we talk about some fairly specific ones. Today’s legislation is fairly specific – I understand we are not expecting hundreds of childcare providers or early childhood providers to make use of the mechanisms we are putting in place – but it is important. It is certainly important from a safety point of view, and

it is important for some other things we will pick up on in the regulations. I think the member for South-West Coast, who has now left the chamber, did call it Melbourne-centric, which I thought was a little unfair. I would point out that there are multistorey buildings in regional Victoria. I do not know if any of them have early childhood services in them, but at some point I am sure they will.

To go right to the heart of the bill we have in front of us, it implements that recommendation and specifically establishes an approval in principle scheme for new early childhood services in buildings that are three or more storeys high. As I said, and as previous speakers have noted, that is particularly relevant with respect to emergency evacuations. I think any of us who have had the experience of trying to get a toddler to put their shoes on would appreciate the potentially – I do not want to make light of it – quite serious situation of having to evacuate 30 or 40 toddlers or indeed infants, who obviously cannot walk. The member for Narre Warren South actually mentioned to me that he, I believe in his time as the very successful secretary of what was then the National Union of Workers, observed a childcare facility they had above their headquarters and watched sometimes in drills all of the kids being led down the staircase and so forth.

Gary Maas: In nappies.

Nathan LAMBERT: In nappies, as the member says.

Paul Edbrooke: A bit like a division in Parliament.

Nathan LAMBERT: There are some similarities. Anyway, as I said, not to make light of that, you can imagine it is a very serious situation and one which this bill helps address.

I do just want to also pick up that those of us who are familiar with the regulations will know that there is some very important stuff in there about outdoor space. There are outdoor space requirements per child and natural light requirements. There are requirements relating to sleep for children, which is of course important. We note as always that a lot of the regulations are there because they particularly support children with a disability or other inclusion needs, so it is important that services meet all of them. Our Department of Education has that key role as a regulator and will be applying and running the approval in principle process that we will hopefully support today. I certainly know locally in Preston and Reservoir our centres are very attuned to the requirements of those regulations, and in fact we are talking to the fine people at Nara Community Early Learning Centre about expanding some open space for them at their Melbourne Polytechnic site. I know the member from Ripon said that she did not have any multistorey facilities in her electorate. I do not think we do either. But as we know, the government has recently released its landmark housing statement. We do expect Melbourne to become more dense over time. We will see more European-height buildings. No doubt, as is the case in Europe, some of those buildings will have early childhood facilities in them and these regulations will apply.

In essence the great attraction to developers and to service providers is that they will have certainty. They will go to get their building permit. Before they do so they will get their approval in principle. They will have a piece of paper that legally says that they have met the requirements, and they will not have to go back and do expensive rectification works and the like. In essence therefore I suppose the bill is supporting the smoother and faster development of multistorey early childhood education and care services.

Of course it is part of our broader \$14 billion Best Start, Best Life reform package, and we know that as part of that package the state government itself will become a provider of long day care and integrated kinder services. I know that new centres will be coming to a whole range of wonderful locations around the state. I see the member for Frankston is here; I think there is a new centre due in Frankston North – plus Glenroy and Heidelberg West. The member for Ripon has left, but Maryborough is getting one.

Paul Edbrooke interjected.

Nathan LAMBERT: I have got the member for Frankston's attention. Importantly for me, Reservoir will get a new centre out of that work. You will note when you look through the list that we are supporting a lot of areas in that list that historically have had high levels of economic disadvantage, and that is a factor and an important part of the work that we are doing. Certainly the new centre will be very welcome in Reservoir, whether it is multistorey or not.

I should in the time I have got left just note that we do have some challenges in the Darebin area with council. Council are anticipating that they might lower the level of financial support for community childhood centres. I note that the member for Northcote, who is here, has spoken about this on previous occasions and is I suppose leading our efforts to convince council to ensure that they provide centres first and foremost with more certainty than they are at the moment. Centres only have two years certainty; we are asking them to provide more.

Kat Thephanous interjected.

Nathan LAMBERT: Exactly – that is important, as the member for Northcote says, for retaining staff, for doing planning, for applying for grants and for all those sorts of things. But then more fundamentally we would like them not to impose additional costs on the centres. It is unfortunately a thing that happens sometimes in public policy – when one level of government increases its funding, another level of government looks to take that chance to pull some money away. It is always a bit of a risk, and we certainly hope that that will not be the case in Darebin.

Turning then just to the final parts of the bill we have in front of us that deal with the Children's Services Act 1996, as we have seen, firstly they just mirror the approval in principle process that we have just discussed at length, inserting it into that act, which covers some of our other services. I know locally in our part of the world – as the member for Northcote knows – Chris Lombardo at Bridge Darebin often speaks to us about the importance of aligning the way we do policy between the two acts. She will be pleased to see we are doing so here.

Finally, part 5 of the bill introduces the infringeable offence scheme that the member for Kew mentioned at the top of her remarks. I understand that is not likely to be used with any frequency, but it is there, again, to ensure consistency.

I am pleased to see the opposition support this particular bill. I would like to wrap up by thanking Minister Blandthorn and of course the former minister, Minister Stitt, and their teams for their work. I would like to thank Kim Little, Bronwen FitzGerald, Lisa Gandolfo, Greg Norton, Amanda Powell and other members of the department, who have put a great deal of work into it.

Of course our early childhood centres are putting a great deal of work into rolling out these reforms. We know they are not trivial, and we appreciate the efforts they are putting in. Their stakeholders and peak bodies have contributed to the development of today's bill. I understand it comes here with their support. The Best Start, Best Life reform is about making sure that kids have the best start to have the best life, and I commend this bill to the house.

David SOUTHWICK (Caulfield) (12:04): I rise to make some comments on the Early Childhood Legislation Amendment (Premises Approval in Principle) Bill 2023 and say at the outset, as you have heard the member for Kew mention, we are supporting this bill. Quality childhood education is one of the key foundations for any young person, and it is so important to get those early years right and provide the quality care that families and children deserve. In this house there are a number of things that we could be doing for that: ensuring that we have got enough staff to work in these childcare facilities, that we have got the facilities and that we are providing the support for the families and making sure that these childcare facilities are affordable.

This particular bill talks about multilevel facilities and new facilities, which are important as part of the growth. But I wanted to focus my attention today on what we are doing to support our existing centres, particularly the community centres that are so important in terms of providing choice. Those

community-run centres really keep the market running right, because when they are community run, when they are run largely with boards and families that are supporting them, then they really sharpen up, provide that quality care and keep private providers in check in the overall system.

I wanted to draw attention particularly to centres in my area – Caulfield, Murrumbeena and Carnegie. These early learning centres are in jeopardy of being closed; the City of Glen Eira notified many parents on 4 October that it intends to potentially close these centres by the end of the year. As you can imagine, many of the parents are quite distraught about this, rightfully so, because these centres have been so valuable. In fact on measure they rate exceptionally well in terms of the quality of child care that they provide. They have a long history of great results and really, really good feedback in terms of the educators that are at these childcare centres, and there is such a groundswell of support to keep these centres open. I understand there are pressures on the council in terms of being able to manage their budget to keep the centres open, and I would urge the state to work with the council to do whatever they possibly can to ensure centres like Caulfield, Murrumbeena and Carnegie stay open.

There is consultation. There are a number of activities. I know the member for Oakleigh has agreed to attend a rally, which I also will be attending. I know certainly the member for McNamara is also attending that rally. So there is a lot of goodwill in terms of trying to do this, but it needs more than goodwill. It needs money, it needs resources and it needs commitments to those parents that the centres can remain open – at the very least until they have choices and other options, because to tell parents in October that their centres are going to close literally by the end of the year gives them no choice, no options. We already know that in a pretty tight market those choices are limited for many of those parents. Many of those parents want community centres. They have deliberately chosen centres like Caulfield, Murrumbeena and Carnegie as their centres because of the quality care that they provide, the choice, the grounding and the level of support. That is the kind of child care that they want. I want to particularly recognise the great work of Ashlea Diamond, Jeremy Koadlow, Emiko Hunt and many others that have really driven this campaign to raise awareness around keeping the centres open.

I also mention that we had a similar situation in the City of Port Phillip just before the last election, and in that particular instance we had The Avenue Children’s Centre and Kindergarten in Balaclava, in my electorate; the Eildon Road Childcare and Kindergarten in St Kilda, in the member for Albert Park’s electorate; and the Elwood Children’s Centre in Elwood, which is in the member for Brighton’s electorate. I know certainly the member for Brighton and I worked with a number of those parents. We raised those issues. A number of other members of Parliament got involved with this as well. Ultimately, with a lot of pressure from parents, those centres were able to remain open.

So if we are able to do it in Port Phillip, then I would ask that we do whatever we can to ensure that the centres in Glen Eira also remain open. A lot of these centres in Glen Eira require upgrades in terms of their facilities – their old buildings – so maybe that might be an option, and even an additional model going forward. It might not be a situation where the council can operate these centres forever, but let us look at other models that allow, potentially, the sustainability of these childcare centres going forward. We need to explore that. We need to ensure that costs are sustainable for parents and also to be able to run them and we need to ensure that we are not just building new centres but investing in the ones that we have got. That is why I think this is really important in making this contribution today.

It is all well and good to be able to change the legislation for multistorey childcare centres, and certainly there will be a requirement for that, and there will be some that will suit really well, particularly with the cost of land. I know in my area there will be areas where that will work well. At the same time, I would like to see equal effort put into our existing centres. You cannot just keep opening new ones and closing others that have had such a great reputation, already have a lot of goodwill in the community, have had an investment in the community and have a great parent community that put a lot of blood, sweat and tears into ensuring that those kids get the best opportunities they can in those centres. So I would ask the government to do what they can in working with the City of Glen Eira to keep the Carnegie, Caulfield and Murrumbeena early childcare centres open. I think it is really, really important going forward.

I will conclude my comments there, but I just say, particularly to many of those parents that I know are really struggling at the moment – coming up to Christmas, with all of the other cost-of-living pressures that many families are currently experiencing at the moment, the last thing they want on top of increased costs of child care is a decrease in options for child care. That is what we are seeing, because you cannot just keep closing these childcare centres. Community centres are the lifeblood, they are the heart, and they are the things that keep the market going in terms of being able to provide those options and opportunities for younger people. As we say, there is nothing better than quality child care. If we get it right early, we provide those huge options and opportunities for kids into the future. I absolutely support the best we can do to ensure we keep childcare centres open and provide funding and resources for them, and we support them going forward.

Bronwyn HALFPENNY (Thomastown) (12:11): I rise to speak in support of the Early Childhood Legislation Amendment (Premises Approval in Principle) Bill 2023. As we all know, the new Premier Jacinta Allan has very clearly identified and raised the issue of children as very, very high on the Allan Labor government's agenda going forward in this term of government. A lot of work has already been done to support families and children, and the amendments that this piece of legislation provides really have to be seen in a much larger context, because it is very rare that a piece of legislation or an amendment is just a small piece that stands alone by itself without any other context. In this case, when we are talking about child care, children's services and early years education, we are actually talking about a much bigger context and a much bigger reform – a huge reform in fact from the Allan Labor government – when we talk about our most important thing, which is our children and future generations. It has been identified that early years education is so, so important to the development of people and the contribution they can make in society, and we want to make sure that we can provide the very best to our children so they can be their very best as they go through their lives.

Of course we have done a lot of work – which I will talk a bit further about in terms of the huge investments – but before going through what this legislation is about I just want make a point that seems to be missing from the other side here: there are three levels of government in Australia and they all have responsibilities when it comes to education of different levels. For example, the federal government is responsible for child care, and in that area, after a dismal 10 years or more of a Liberal federal government that really tried as in many other ways to pull apart and dismantle and break up services such as child care, the federal Labor government in the last budget provided an additional \$4.5 billion to families so that they could get further subsidisation through the childcare subsidy, and also further supports for First Nations children.

Then we have local government. Local government is responsible for kindergartens – the building of kindergartens and the running of kindergartens – although the state does provide for the educators in those kindergartens. Again, when we are talking about responsibilities, it cannot all be left to the state government. I think we are pulling our weight well above what is required through legislation and government responsibilities. It always has to be said that the state government is well and truly doing the heavy lifting, but other levels of government have a lot of responsibility and need to come to the party and start doing a bit more too.

In terms of this legislation, we are talking about a couple of amendments to different acts. There is the Education and Care Services National Law Act 2010, and there is the Children's Services Act 1996. In terms of these two pieces of legislation the amendments are really around, first of all, harmonising law so that Victorian law is consistent with that in the other states and territories. This came about as a result of discussions and meetings with ministers from across the country, including the federal minister, to ensure that we have a system that is consistent across the states and territories when it comes to legislation around approval. Childcare centres and early education centres often operate in many states, so it is really important to ensure that legislation is consistent across the country. That makes it more certain, it makes it more safe and it ensures that everybody is working in the same direction.

This harmonisation of course is around the approval in principle process for the building of early education centres. It means that the developers, the builders and the agencies can have a little bit more

certainty in terms of getting approval in principle for what they are building. This is in particular related to multistorey centres. This is a relatively new thing; I can think of just one centre in the whole of the Thomastown electorate that is multistorey. I have visited that centre; it is a great centre. The kids are really happy. You can see it as soon as you walk in; they are laughing and concentrating and working on whatever projects or activities they are doing. But I do know that that centre did have quite a lot of trouble. There was a lot of uncertainty. There was a lot of time-consuming toing and froing before they were able to set up that childcare centre in a multistorey building.

The ability to get prior approval and get the certainty to allow for childcare services in multistorey buildings is getting really critical. In particular I look at, again, the Thomastown electorate. There is a dire lack of land, and it is very expensive. We do have growing suburbs. There are the outer suburbs of Wollert and North Epping. More and more new families with young children are coming to live in those lovely parts of this great state. We also have the Epping activity centre, which has been nominated as one of I think 10 centres in the housing statement where we will be building lots of new homes for families. Hopefully – it is expected – there will be affordable homes and a lot of homes so that people can own their own home. But of course they will need services around them, and early education and childcare services will be most important.

As I was saying, this legislation builds on a whole lot of other work that has been done by the Allan Labor government – for example, our \$14 billion Best Start, Best Life program, which talks about free kinder, which has already started, for four-year-old children as well as three-year-old children. There are also our many, many grants and infrastructure programs to help support either existing kindergartens to redevelop and extend or the building of new kindergartens. I am just thinking of the most recent ties we have with the co-located kindergarten that has just been built next to Lalor Primary School. That is a fantastic kinder; it has got incredible facilities. When you go in there it just looks amazing. We are still building on those sorts of centres.

There is also, as previous speakers have mentioned, the fantastic program of state built and run early learning centres. The suburb of Lalor in the electorate of Thomastown has been nominated to have such a centre. There are commitments that the centres will open by 2028. I know residents in that area are really excited about this. They are always asking me when it is starting and what is happening, and I can assure them that the commitment is for all of the centres to be open by 2028.

Probably the most important part of early childhood learning is the teachers and the staff that look after the children and provide that education and that support. We are also increasing investment in this area to upskill and retain early childhood teachers and educators. There are scholarships, there are incentives, there are traineeships and there are programs to provide career incentives in order to support the existing people that are working in this area as well as to attract new people, because we are going to need a lot more of them in order to fulfil our very optimistic and exciting program in the area of early childhood learning.

This legislation, I believe, is supported by all sides of the house. It is just one part in a much larger program of reform around early childhood learning. This continues the steps that we need to take in order to make sure that we expand services and provide the best quality services that we can.

Annabelle CLEELAND (Euroa) (12:21): I rise to speak on the Early Childhood Legislation Amendment (Premises Approval in Principle) Bill 2023, a bill that I am happy to support. Ensuring the safety of children in early education and childcare settings is of paramount importance to me and the entire coalition. With rapidly increasing demand for early childhood education and childcare services across the state, ensuring the children in these facilities have safe evacuation routes in the event of an emergency is integral. It is also important to provide regulatory certainty to organisations seeking to offer childcare and early education services in multistorey buildings so that there are enough childcare and kinder places to meet growing demand over coming years. The coalition supports this bill because it will improve the safety of children in early education and childcare centres that are housed within multistorey buildings as well as improve the regulatory approval process for

organisations seeking to establish new early education and childcare centres. This bill implements recommendations from the 2019 national quality framework review, which aim to improve the regulatory framework governing early childhood education and care across the country. The NQF review framework has broad stakeholder support and reflects the consensus position of all state and territory governments.

Sadly, there are still several areas where this Labor government lags behind when it comes to improving the wellbeing of young children. A survey I organised has highlighted the dire state of child care in my electorate of Euroa, with responses from all over the electorate sharing similar concerns. The survey, which was launched in June and remains open to responses, asks members of the community several questions about their experiences in accessing child care. Responses have been received from parents in Avenel, Benalla, Broadford and Rushworth, as well as many small towns. I wanted to hear directly from the community and bring their stories to Parliament to create meaningful change in the region because, simply put, there are far too many families in our community who are struggling to access childcare options. Our major towns are not inaccessible backwaters, but they are placed at a disadvantage when it comes to child care. The lack of childcare facilities is preventing parents from returning to the workforce at a time when the cost of living is rapidly rising. This is a real handbrake on our community and places a hurdle in front of young people who want to raise their family in the country.

Some of the issues raised in the responses include multiyear waitlists, a lack of childcare providers in their town and families relocating to other areas to access better childcare options. The responses share overwhelmingly negative experiences, with 100 per cent of parents who shared their experience saying they have been adversely impacted by the lack of available child care under this government. Some of the responses from this survey have been truly disheartening.

Jodie from Benalla said:

The centre that my son has been at this year ... has just announce that on Friday 22nd December, they are permanently closing their doors. They can not find staff and therefore can not have the number of children to make the centre financially viable. The lack of staff has meant that I have had to pick my son up early on certain days, find care when the centre has had to close unexpectedly. I am a single mother who works full time. The pressure on me is huge and I have had to lean heavily on my mother and sister to help me through this past 12 months.

Another parent said:

There is no spots and the waitlists are 12-18 months long. I've had my 2 on the waiting lists for 8+ months and no sign of a spot anytime soon. We are struggling financially whilst not being able to access childcare for our kids.

Another local mum, Isabel, said:

No access as there are no spots available.

Maddison from Avenel told me that:

Was on the waitlist for months (nearly a year) for 4 different childcares (government and family daycares). Couldn't go back to work. Nearly lost my job due to not being able to go back enough days. Finally have care but not in our home town which nearly an hour each morning and afternoon for drop offs/pick ups which adds a financial strain.

Beth from Euroa told me that:

When I had my first I popped her name down at the only childcare centre in euroa at 4months. I was told there was a waiting list. She's now 2 and still no places have come up. The family daycare options are all booked up also. I've heard at playgroups that a lot of families have moved out of the district as there was no childcare available.

We have women waiting in foyers of childcare facilities seeing if a sick kid has opened up a space for their own children.

I had a constituent from Broadford call my office last week and explain some of her concerns with childcare in the region. Broadford has a 1½-year-long waitlist for their childcare facility, meaning that this teacher was unable to return to work anytime soon. Due to the waitlist, facilities in neighbouring towns were looked into as possible options, but sadly, these towns are suffering with similar problems. Broadford is on the verge of a massive expansion, yet infrastructure in the town is not matching this pace. On top of issues with child care, this local mother pointed out there are still issues with a number of doctors and dentists, meaning that kids were being left behind.

While the government has made ambitious promises to increase the number of childcare facilities in our state, we are failing to see a coherent plan or any real progress. The early childcare centre promised for Seymour will not be built any time soon. The Labor government choosing to not include it in the first round of centres being established is heartbreaking and reflective of how out of touch it is with the childcare crisis.

Juliana Addison: On a point of order, Deputy Speaker, I am just wondering about the relevance of this discussion, considering that is the Early Childhood Legislation Amendment (Premises Approval in Principle) Bill. It is very wideranging.

Emma Kealy: On the point of order, Deputy Speaker, as the member just stated, it has been a wideranging debate, and I ask you to rule in that way.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! I concur that it has been a wideranging debate. The member to continue in silence, please.

Annabelle CLEELAND: Thank you, Deputy Speaker. The Labor government choosing not to include Seymour in its first round of centres being established is heartbreaking and reflective of how out of touch it is with the childcare crisis that is plaguing our state. The recent promise to establish a new early education centre in Seymour is a clear example of the empty commitments that align with election season. The misleading deadline of 2028 for the Seymour childcare centre's delivery shows a lack of genuine concern for the immediate needs of the community. Despite the region being regarded as a childcare desert under this government, there has been a disregard for regional families who need reliable and affordable child care now. A 2022 report from the Mitchell Institute showed the Euroa electorate had a number of childcare deserts, meaning areas that have childcare places available for less than 33 per cent of children in the local community.

Members interjecting.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order!

Annabelle CLEELAND: I might repeat that figure for those that are not listening. There are childcare places available for less than 33 per cent of children in our local community. The report showed that Seymour, Benalla, Kilmore and Broadford were some of the areas struggling the most, while smaller towns such as Murchison, Rushworth, Tooborac and Redesdale have no child care at all. So far there have been no commitments to fund a childcare centre in an electorate other than Seymour, which remains without a set time line. There are many women angry about this false and misleading promise, and I am one of them. Towns like Avenel and Nagambie are still in desperate need of more child care options, whereas smaller towns like Murchison, Rushworth, Tooborac and Redesdale have no child care at all. While the safety and wellbeing of children will be improved by this bill, the Labor government remains happy to seemingly disregard this in other areas such as school –

Vicki Ward: Deputy Speaker, I have a point of order. There is one important word missing from the member's contribution, which is 'federal' government. I would ask the member to be relevant to a state government bill rather than addressing federal government responsibility.

Jess Wilson: On the point of order, Deputy Speaker, the member was being entirely relevant. In fact she had just referred to the bill.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: I will comment that the member for Kew was very tight to the bill in opening the debate. However, since then it has been a very wideranging debate.

Annabelle CLEELAND: I was going to talk about school crossings, but I guess that might be stretching it. But that is another issue where the government disregards the safety and wellbeing of our children. I just wanted to do a quick shout-out regarding a report that was –

Members interjecting.

Annabelle CLEELAND: Okay. Thank you to all the childcare providers, school crossing supervisors, parents, babysitters and teachers for doing an amazing job caring for our children. The safety of our children is and always will be the priority, and it was about time the government realised this and stepped up to the plate.

Juliana ADDISON (Wendouree) (12:31): I am so delighted to make a contribution today about the Early Childhood Legislation Amendment (Premises Approval in Principle) Bill 2023 – and that is principle with an L-E, so I will not be talking about schools. This is all about ensuring continued quality and safety of multistorey early education services. We are talking about the infrastructure and the premises approval for this infrastructure by making an approval in principle process available during the planning and design stages. That is what I am going to talk about. But I am also going to use the wideranging nature, the width and the breadth, of the debate to have a bit of a chat about some of my favourite childcare services and kindergartens, because I think there is precedent to allow me to have a bit of a chat.

Members interjecting.

Juliana ADDISON: They are in regional Victoria. I really do want to thank the member for Ripon, our Minister for Local Government, the member for Preston and the member for Thomastown, who preceded me, for their outstanding contributions. Importantly, I would really like to congratulate Minister Blandthorn in the other place on her appointment as Victoria's new Minister for Children. I welcome the Premier's commitment to the wellbeing of our state's children and families and creating the children portfolio.

The Allan Labor government's focus on child development and wellbeing, as well as improvements to child protection and our pioneering Best Start, Best Life early education reforms, will deliver better outcomes for all young Victorians, as will this bill, which is about premises approvals in principle, which I am looking forward to talking about too. But before I talk about the importance of this bill, I would like to acknowledge and thank everyone who works in early education in Victoria. I truly believe that being an educator, and an early educator particularly, is more than a job. It is an opportunity to shape the lives of our littlest learners, to introduce them to ideas and experiences that are unknown, to develop their curiosity and love of learning and to allow them to discover their creativity, to take risks and to make mistakes in a safe space.

As a former schoolteacher I know that accessible and high-quality early education services are essential to ensuring positive outcomes for children. Research shows that play-based learning is a powerful way to support children's development. Our daughters had such positive experiences with their early educators at Lake Gardens Children's Centre in my electorate, as well as the most beautiful kindergarten, Fidelity kindergarten, in central Ballarat. Mike and I are forever grateful for the care and support that our children were given by early educators every day, the interest they had in their progress and the commitment to ensuring that they were school ready. So to Vicky, Brooke, Renee, Karen, Nikki, Heather, Mary, Kate, Mandy and so many others: thank you for being amazing early educators. I would also like to acknowledge the great work of ECKA, the Eureka Community Kindergarten Association, across Ballarat for their approach to enriching children's lives in learning environments that are safe, welcome and inclusive.

Emma Kealy: On a point of order, Deputy Speaker, on relevance, and this is a similar point of order that was raised by the member for Wendouree with the previous speaker, whilst there is absolutely an opportunity to recognise and thank our childcare workers, I ask you to bring her back to the bill.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: I think I understand your point. It has been a very wideranging debate, and I was here 5 minutes ago.

Juliana ADDISON: I have said it before, and I will say it again. My dad's saying is 'Double standards are better than none', so thank you very, very much.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: The member would not be reflecting on the Chair with that remark, I would hope.

Juliana ADDISON: The Education and Care Services National Law Act 2010 regulates most early childhood education and care sectors in Australia. The national law – we can talk about the national law – in conjunction with the national regulations forms the national quality framework, which applies to a variety of services, including kinders, long day cares, family day care centres and outside school hours care. The framework is central to ensuring safe, quality care across 4740 such services in Victoria. The national law is hosted by Victoria, meaning that the agreement of other states and territories and the Commonwealth changes to the Education and Care Services National Law Act here are applied around the nation. So while the national law applies to most children's services in our state, it does not extend to the 210 occasional care and limited hours care services. These types of services are regulated instead in Victoria by the Children's Services Act 1996 and regulation.

The bill before us today, for those who have not read it or are yet to read it, seeks to make regulatory improvements to both key acts. Amendments are proposed to the national law within the Education and Care Services National Law Act 2010 in response to the 2019 national quality framework review and subsequent education ministers meeting. These will establish an approval in-principle process for certain multistorey premises so that official guidance can be made available prior to the construction commencing. Amendments to the Children's Services Act 1996 will extend this approval in-principle process with services not covered by the national law still able to benefit. Separate amendments which designate certain offences and infringement offences will also align the Children's Services Act with the national law.

As an overview of the bill, what we are doing is improving the processes involved in regulating early childhood services – that is the primary purpose of this bill. In particular it seeks to adjust the approval process for multistorey three-plus level services by making approval in principle available during the preconstruction stage. It is worth noting that less than 1 per cent of early childhood services are located within multistorey buildings, but this number is expected to grow. Multistorey childcare centres can face unique challenges concerning outdoor space, natural light, ventilation and more – importantly, including emergency evacuation. I note the member for Kew talked about that in her contribution as well. As such, there are relevant requirements that these centres must comply with under the national quality framework in order to receive service approval and begin operating. The 2019 review identified, however, that multistorey premises in some cases may inadvertently be built in compliance with local planning laws but not in compliance with the national quality framework. If such discrepancies are not discovered until the end of construction, when providers seek regulatory approval as an early childhood service, then the necessary rectification works can be costly in terms of both time and money. The amendments that are being put forward in this bill will address this by facilitating planning stage in-principle approvals under national law for buildings of three storeys or more.

In Victoria this is proposed as a voluntary process which will encourage builders, designers and providers to seek regulatory guidance and assurance before starting construction on a new build or a renovated multistorey childcare centre. The new approval in principle process will promote awareness of early childhood services, safe practices and quality standards. This will further ensure that new

childcare centres are designed as high-quality environments for our youngest Victorians. Whilst we may have some disagreements in this place, that would not be one of them, I am sure. These amendments to the Education and Care Services National Law Act relate specifically to regular services which cover most children's services in Victoria. However, amendments are also proposed to the Children's Services Act to make an approval in principle process available for properties that are intended for occasional or limited hours care.

On another matter – and I will be brief – additional elements of the act concerning infringement notices will better align with the regulatory framework across early childhood services. Infringements are an enforcement tool currently available under the national law in response to certain substantive conduct as a part of a broader array of regulatory powers that includes compliance notices, conditions and suspension. I could talk a lot more about the wonderful technicalities of this very significant bill and about the approvals process, but I will just say that we know that kinder and play-based learning are incredibly important parts of a child's lifelong education. Our reforms are about giving Victorian kids the best start in life, with two years of early learning shown to provide extra academic and social benefits – benefits that continue throughout the school years. I welcome the introduction of the Early Childhood Legislation Amendment (Premises Approval in Principle) Bill 2023, and I commend the bill to the house.

Wayne FARNHAM (Narracan) (12:41): I am happy to rise today to contribute to the Early Childhood Legislation Amendment (Premises Approval in Principle) Bill 2023 – the positive bill-making changes that we need in order to deliver more centres and spaces across Victoria. It will amend legislation to help builders, developers and education, care and service providers to obtain approval in principle from regulatory authorities for centres based in multistorey buildings, which is actually a very complex circumstance to arrange. Multilevel buildings do present very unique challenges when housing childcare centres, but I am pleased to see we are taking a proactive approach here in an effort to get more centres into more locations where we desperately need them.

The purpose of this bill is – coming from my previous profession – to give preapproval to builders, developers et cetera so that they can get the regulations right at the start. I am happy the government has put this forward, but what we have in this state at the moment is a planning system that is quite broken. We have heard the former Premier on previous occasions really berate councils because of hold-ups in planning. It happens across the state. I am not going to single out any LGA, but it does happen across the state, and we have heard the former Premier on quite a few occasions berate councils for holding up the planning process. Now, the problem is that our councils across this state are trying to adhere to government regulations when it comes to planning approvals. So I am just wondering: is this bill coming forward now to – rather than fix the planning process – short-cut this area so we can get these childcare centres up and going quicker, which we all know we desperately need?

Victoria is a state that is growing in population; we realise that. I do appreciate, as does everyone in this chamber, that early learning is very important. We do have quite a waiting list across the state for people wanting to get their children into early learning. We need these spaces available because we need more people in the workforce. We need that and we need it desperately, because there are a lot of businesses out there struggling at the moment to get staff. The more childcare places we have, the better off our economy will be because we will have more people working. I just wonder if part of this is actually short-cutting the process where the government should really be looking at planning as an overall picture – not just one specific part. The government has to look at planning and at the regulations of planning, because that is holding up numerous things across Victoria, and it is not just childcare centres. In this chamber we talk about a lack of housing. Again, if government looked at the planning schemes and reformed planning so developers could get more land released so we could bring down the price of housing, it would go a long way to easing the cost of living, especially when it comes to purchasing a house.

In regional Victoria our access to childcare centres is very, very low. In my electorate I know many, many people that are waiting to get into childcare centres or early learning centres. The other challenge

we have in this space is the lack of staff. We have a lack of facilities, lack of staff and lack of places. They are the three main contributing factors as to why there is so much pressure on child care. The government really has to have a plan going forward. I know the government has the 50 centres it is trying to bring out. I think four are going to be completed by 2025, as the Minister for Local Government said earlier. The government needs to accelerate that. I do not think four in the space of the next 18 months is quite enough. In regional Victoria and in my electorate in the first round of releases we did not get any. Not one of the government-owned centres is in the seat of Narracan. I bring this up because the Minister for Local Government brought it up earlier. It astounds me. I hear the government say quite often 'We're here for all Victorians', but I have got one of the fastest growing regions – my electorate covers the shire of Cardinia and the shire of Baw Baw, two of the fastest growing LGAs in the state – and not one of these government-owned centres is in my electorate. That is concerning for me. I know the West Gippsland Hospital, for example –

Juliana Addison interjected.

Wayne FARNHAM: There are 1000 babies a year born at the West Gippsland Hospital. That is just West Gippsland, not Cardinia. The only reason it is 1000 babies a year at the West Gippsland Hospital is because that is all they can cope with. Anyone else in my electorate has to go elsewhere to have babies. That is all they can handle at West Gippsland; it is capped.

Vicki Ward: On a point of order, Deputy Speaker, while I appreciate the passion with which the member is advocating for his community and his deep care on this issue, I would ask that you direct the member to talk not so much about health care, which I understand is also an area of passion for him –

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: Your point of order is?

Vicki Ward: but to go back to child care and planning, as opposed to health care.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: Relevance. Thank you, Minister. It has been a wideranging debate. I encourage the member to come back to the bill. Let us proceed.

Wayne FARNHAM: Well, babies do grow up eventually, hence I went to the babies. But that is okay. I did hear the Minister for Local Government talk earlier about the childcare desert and areas that need it. Well, if we are going to talk about childcare deserts, then Narracan would be the Sahara, because we have been really, really let down by the government in child care and having funding for child care. The government's lack of interest in Narracan and lack of interest in early learning or childcare centres is putting pressure on our mums and dads. They cannot get back to work. They need to wait for positions.

We support this bill. There is not a problem with the bill; we support it. But I encourage the government to invest in regional Victoria a little bit more than what they are doing – and not just invest in regional Victoria in Labor seats, invest in regional Victoria in seats that are held by this side of the chamber, because we suffer the same pressures as everyone else around the state. I would like to see in the next round of offers for the government centres that are going to be built – I think there are another 20 to be released very soon – some of them in my electorate. I represent an electorate that has two of the fastest growing LGAs in the state, and I do not think that it is fair that they miss out on these government centres. This is extremely important for my electorate so people can get back to work. We in regional Victoria struggle to get workers, we struggle to get staff and we struggle to get doctors, nurses and everything else. So anything the government can do to help my electorate get these childcare centres up and going, so we can have more people working and taking pressure off businesses and everything else, I would really appreciate.

It was pleasing that in seeking advice from parties who might be impacted by these changes, this was largely positive. They want to see more clarity from the government on issues like clearer regulation around planning and certainty for the preapproval of centres. It appears too that the government has taken on board criticism that was raised last year and engaged more stakeholders to ensure their views

and concerns are being addressed in these amendments. We need to see more of this from this government. Get out of Spring Street, listen and you will get better results.

Alison MARCHANT (Bellarine) (12:51): It is a great pleasure to speak on the Early Childhood Legislation Amendment (Premises Approval in Principle) Bill 2023. Being a new member in this place means I might not have the whole background to some of these bills, but I do know that this is a government that is absolutely committed to ensuring that we have quality childhood education and care in this state. It plays a vital role in supporting our youngest children. Also, being a former primary school teacher, I absolutely understand that early education is laying the foundations for our youngest learners. It lays foundations for better health care, education and employment opportunities later in life. This is a government that also has not stopped investing in education centres. Whether it be our centres, our schools, our TAFEs or our educators, we make significant investment in education because it is part of our government and what we do – it is in our DNA. We have seen a big investment here in this state in early childhood with Best Start, Best Life – free three-year-old and four-year-old kinder – a nation-leading reform, and now we are working towards pre-prep.

With a bit of indulgence, here is a small history lesson. In 2012, just over a decade ago, there were reforms at a national level. We had landmark reforms from the Gillard government, a Labor government. They introduced the national quality framework and national quality standards. These were major reforms that set the standard for early childhood education. I think there might be a bit of a pattern here – education is in Labor's DNA. We are a party that is committed to education.

Speaking of history in this debate, we always look to reform. We look to do better and we look to improve, and that is what this bill is about. It is ensuring that we are futureproofing our legislation and also modernising it for the growth that we are seeing in our state. The national quality framework and national quality standards aim to raise that bar, and they certainly have done that. Since then we have seen remarkable outcomes for our youngest children, and there is still more to be done. Former Prime Minister Julia Gillard is now a royal commissioner in South Australia. They are holding a Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care in the state of South Australia. She recently said:

Each child has the right to grow, learn and thrive.

That is exactly what this reform is about and what we do here in Victoria.

I have two children myself, and both have loved going to kindergarten. I will take this opportunity to thank all of our early childhood educators. They do an incredible job supporting our families. They are integral to family life. They get to see the ups and downs. They probably get to hear about a lot of things in show-and-tell when children come to kinder. I would like to give a shout-out to Nicole and Jocelyn, who were very much integral to our children's kindergarten experience and took wonderful care of them.

In the last term this government enacted the Early Childhood Legislation Amendment Act 2022 to implement most of the findings and recommendations of the 2019 national quality framework review, and that was approved by all states and territories and the Commonwealth through the education ministers meeting. This bill seeks to enhance that act and the regulatory system for early childhood education in Victoria and nationally in the following ways. The bill amends the Education and Care Services National Law to establish a scheme that allows developers, builders or education and care service providers to obtain approval in principle from the regulatory authority in relation to a premises for a centre-based service proposed to be built or renovated in a multistorey building, which in this case is three storeys or more. It will also amend the Education and Care Services National Law Act 2010 to declare that the premises approval in principle scheme applies in Victoria as a voluntary application process. This is about giving some certainty.

The bill amends the Children's Services Act 1996 to mirror the infringeable offences in the national law to ensure that all early childhood services in Victoria are subject to the same regulatory enforcement mechanisms. Making this amendment to provide approval in principle ensures that

applicants have assurance that their proposed premises designs meet the physical requirements in the regulatory scheme. Importantly, any changes needed can happen before the commencement of construction work, avoiding the time and cost of rectification works once the premises are completed. With the changes and what we are seeing with the growth in Victoria and modern facilities, which may mean multistorey complexes will be built, this amendment will ensure that we keep pace as we evolve and grow.

The science is pretty clear. We know that the first five years of a child's development see rapid growth. We know that 85 to 90 per cent of brain development happens in that time. They learn from birth – the science is there to say they learn before birth. Having that quality early education setting really does influence a child's trajectory for the rest of their life. Providing that rich environment, which can happen in a home but also in an educational setting, where you have that nurturing environment, language opportunities, learning with positive interactions and giving children that social and emotional wellbeing structure, that eagerness to learn – all the things we want to see our youngest develop – can give them those lasting benefits. Formal education – child care, kindergarten settings – is part of a child's journey and part of a family's journey. A quality education system is one that supports families, but when families may be at risk or there may be factors of disadvantage, research shows that children can be developmentally vulnerable.

I mentioned that I used to be a primary school teacher. I never taught prep, or foundation as it is known – those teachers do a wonderful job – but prep teachers would say to me that you could tell the children who had had some formal kindergarten or day care experience. They could sit on the floor and focus on tasks. They had social and emotional wellbeing and got along with others. You could tell the kids who had had that experience; that is the difference that it makes. You can see it. And they adjust so much better to school.

Obviously, having been a teacher this is a topic that is of interest to me, and I am passionate about this. Recently I was able to take part in the Victorian parliamentary internship program, where an MP can have an intern hosted by their electorate office. I was able to have a report prepared on socio-economic and geographic inequality. It is a great report that we can view online.

Sitting suspended 1:00 pm until 2:02 pm.

Business interrupted under sessional orders.

Members

Minister for Development Victoria

Absence

Jacinta ALLAN (Bendigo East – Premier) (14:02): I rise to inform the house that for question time today the Minister for Tourism, Sport and Major Events will answer the questions for the portfolio of creative industries and the Minister for Planning will answer questions for the portfolios of Development Victoria and precincts.

The SPEAKER: Can I acknowledge in the gallery former member for Clarinda the Honourable Hong Lim.

Questions without notice and ministers statements

Payroll tax

John PESUTTO (Hawthorn – Leader of the Opposition) (14:02): My question is to the Premier. Yesterday the Premier stated that residents in Mulgrave who are losing access to medical practices because of the government's new health tax could attend the priority primary care centre in Glen Waverley. When trying to book an appointment at the centre, residents are told 'This clinic is specifically for urgent care for injuries and illnesses, not a replacement for your regular general practitioner'. Will the Premier now apologise for misleading the people of Mulgrave?

Jacinta ALLAN (Bendigo East – Premier) (14:03): I thank most sincerely the Leader of the Opposition for his question, because his question proves the point exactly that the government has had to step in and provide greater access to primary care services because of a decade of inaction from former federal Liberal–National governments. If only the Leader of the Opposition used his energy during that period of time to contact his colleagues in Canberra –

John Pesutto: On a point of order, Speaker, on relevance, I ask you to draw the Premier back to the question about the inconsistency of what the Premier said in this house yesterday and what residents in Mulgrave discover when they go on to the website.

The SPEAKER: The Premier was being relevant to the question that was asked.

Jacinta ALLAN: The question was about how we need to provide more access to primary care services. And this is where the Leader of the Opposition thinks he is being rather clever, but by thinking he is being rather clever he has proved the point exactly that we are increasing points of care –

James Newbury: On a point of order, Speaker, the *Rulings from the Chair* are very, very clear that attacks on members are not in order and certainly not a cover for being embarrassed for being caught out.

The SPEAKER: Order! There is no point of order.

Jacinta ALLAN: We have established 27 priority primary care centres across the state, because we have had to take the unprecedented action to step in and provide Victorians with access to more primary care services following nine years of inaction from the former federal Liberal–National government. If only the Leader of the Opposition, through those countless media interviews he was auditioning from outside of this place to his colleagues inside of this place – not once did he raise his voice in concern about what his former colleagues in Canberra were doing. We are stepping in and taking action.

The SPEAKER: Before I call the Manager of Opposition Business, I would ask that those at the table who have asked a question listen to the answer rather than interjecting constantly.

James Newbury: On a point of order, Speaker, the Premier’s response is nowhere near relevant to the question.

The SPEAKER: Order! The Premier has concluded her answer.

John PESUTTO (Hawthorn – Leader of the Opposition) (14:06): There are over 80 doctors who work in the electorate of Mulgrave who will be forced to pay the government’s new health tax. The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners has said that:

... more than 30% of practices that have to meet that taxation bill are likely to become instantly insolvent.

How is it fair that the residents of Mulgrave will lose at least 24 of their local doctors because of the government’s health tax?

Jacinta ALLAN (Bendigo East – Premier) (14:07): As I have said previously, as the Treasurer has said previously, the payroll tax arrangements continue to operate in the same way as they have for some time since 1983 across all sectors. I am happy to inform the house, though, about what has changed, particularly this year. Indeed just last week, as the Minister for Health has reminded me, last Friday, we were in Gisborne announcing another initiative that is increasing access for Victorians to primary care services through our pharmacy pilot program.

James Newbury: On a point of order, Speaker, on relevance, the question related to the people of Mulgrave losing their doctors. It had nothing to do with Gisborne.

The SPEAKER: I think the Premier was giving an example.

Jacinta ALLAN: Thank you, Speaker, because the question was about increasing access to primary care, and that is exactly what we are doing. We are stepping in because of the failure of the former Liberal–National government that has led to a lack of access to GP and primary care services – and we are stepping in in unprecedented terms.

Members interjecting.

The SPEAKER: Order! I would ask members at the table to cease interjecting during questions and answers.

Ministers statements: parole reform

Jacinta ALLAN (Bendigo East – Premier) (14:08): Today the government has introduced legislation into this house to keep Victorians safe from the worst of the criminals, truly evil individuals, who will remain behind bars where they belong. The changes that have been introduced today will further restrict parole for prisoners convicted of murder, killing children and serious sex offences, sparing victims and their loved ones the pain of repeatedly reliving their trauma if these prisoners become eligible to make a parole application. We are also taking steps through these changes to ensure that convicted murderer Paul Denyer will never be a risk to community safety again under these proposals.

We saw earlier this year how his bid for parole has forced victims’ families and loved ones to relive their trauma, to relive their suffering on an ongoing basis. We have always said, and I want to acknowledge here also my colleague the member for Frankston, that the families of Natalie Russell, Elizabeth Stevens and Debbie Fream should not have to constantly relive their grief and their pain. I want to pay tribute to these families and their loved ones. Their resilience in the face of unspeakable tragedy is just remarkable. We also hope that these changes we have announced will give them some closure. It is important to protect families of other victims too of serious and violent crimes by giving the adult parole board the powers to declare restricted prisoners, meaning that they are unable to apply for release for between five and 10 years after serving the non-parole period of their sentence. In this state, as we have seen, parole is a privilege not a right, and the families affected by the terrible crimes of our most violent offenders deserve certainty and they deserve comfort. We have the toughest parole laws in the country, and we are making them even stronger.

WorkSafe Victoria

John PESUTTO (Hawthorn – Leader of the Opposition) (14:11): My question is to the Premier. The 2022–23 WorkSafe Victoria annual report states that:

Hindsight modelling shows that the premium charged has been below that required for a decade; resulting in an annual premium deficit of \$1.1 billion.

The government has been in office for nine of the past 10 years. Why are Victorians being forced to wear the cost of its incompetence?

Jacinta ALLAN (Bendigo East – Premier) (14:11): Our Labor government has introduced into the Parliament this week – and I do want to acknowledge the bill is already listed on the notice paper, so I will not go to the detail – important forward-looking reforms of our WorkCover system. We are proud as a Labor government that it was a Labor government in the 1980s –

Members interjecting.

The SPEAKER: Order! I would again ask members at the table to cease interjecting.

Jacinta ALLAN: It was a Labor government in the 1980s that created WorkCover. It took a Labor government at the end of the 1990s to save WorkCover after it had been ripped apart by a previous Liberal–National government. We are proud to be embarking on important reforms that are not about the Leader of the Opposition; they are about workers. They are about workers, and they are about making sure we have a modern, fit-for-purpose WorkCover scheme that is supporting workers to get

back to work – to not languish in a scheme that does not provide them with support. So I hope the Leader of the Opposition supports this legislation, supports the establishment of Return to Work Victoria and puts workers front and centre and their care and support front and centre of the future of this scheme.

John PESUTTO (Hawthorn – Leader of the Opposition) (14:13): A 2020 financial sustainability review, which the government hid until after the November 2022 state election, revealed that WorkSafe then had a \$600 million deficit. Given Minister Pearson as the minister for WorkCover has overseen this mess, does the Premier have full confidence in the minister?

Members interjecting.

The SPEAKER: Leader of the Opposition, I have asked you repeatedly to cease interjecting. Once you have asked your question, I expect the person you are asking the question of to be able to respond without interjections.

Jacinta ALLAN (Bendigo East – Premier) (14:14): I am proud to serve in the government with the member for Essendon – the minister for WorkCover, Minister for Transport Infrastructure, Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop and Assistant Treasurer. He is an outstanding individual, and I think it is very brave of the Leader of the Opposition to ask a question about confidence. Turn around and look over there.

John Pesutto: On a point of order, Speaker, on relevance, it is a simple yes or no answer. Does the Premier have confidence in the bumbling minister for WorkCover?

Members interjecting.

The SPEAKER: Order! A point of order is not an opportunity to repeat the question. The Premier will come back to answering the question.

Jacinta ALLAN: Well, the Leader of the Opposition, through his consistent interjections, may have missed the point I was making about what an outstanding member of this government the member for Essendon and Assistant Treasurer is. I am happy to make it very clear – and if you would be quiet for a minute, you might hear the exact words you want to hear – that I have absolute confidence in the minister, because he is doing outstanding work driving reforms and delivering projects on behalf of the Victorian community.

Ministers statements: transport infrastructure projects

Danny PEARSON (Essendon – Minister for Transport Infrastructure, Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, Assistant Treasurer, Minister for WorkSafe and the TAC) (14:16): What a segue! It all comes down to timing, doesn't it.

I rise to update the house on the progress the Allan Labor government is making in delivering the transport infrastructure that Victorians need. Right across our city and our state thousands of workers are busy delivering the Big Build, and I dare say not too many members of this place would have made their way to Parliament today without going past one of our construction sites. I was delighted to be in Watsonia earlier this week to see the massive amount of work going on to assemble the two tunnel-boring machines that will deliver the North East Link. I know the Minister for Police and the Minister for Precincts cannot wait for tunnelling to get started next year to deliver on our promise to build the missing link in Victoria's freeway network.

In the west we have finished tunnelling and are busy building the connections that will help take more than 9000 trucks off local roads every day as soon as the West Gate Tunnel opens in 2025. We are also upgrading key arterial roads, and thousands of Victorians –

James Newbury: On a point of order, Speaker, *Rulings from the Chair* makes it very clear that it is disorderly for any member to be reading a speech, and I put it to you that the minister is clearly reading from a speech.

Members interjecting.

The SPEAKER: Order! Manager of Opposition Business, I was just about to pull you up for interjecting before you called your point of order.

Paul Edbrooke interjected.

The SPEAKER: Order! Member for Frankston, leave the chamber for an hour.

Member for Frankston withdrew from the chamber.

The SPEAKER: Minister, were you reading from notes?

Danny PEARSON: I am referring to notes, Speaker.

The SPEAKER: The minister was referring to his notes. The minister to continue.

Danny PEARSON: We are also upgrading key arterial roads that thousands of Victorians rely on every day – roads like Craigieburn Road in the Minister for Community Sport’s electorate; Hall Road, which I know the Minister for Planning is super excited about; as well as the Healesville-Koo Wee Rup Road, which will be an absolute game changer for the members of both Bass and Pakenham.

We are on track to open a year ahead of schedule, in 2025, the Metro Tunnel. That is going to connect Sunbury with the Cranbourne–Pakenham line, freeing up more space and more capacity in the city loop. That is going to mean that we are going to be able to run more trains more often. And the massive Suburban Rail Loop has established worksites right across the east of Melbourne in great locations like Box Hill and Glen Waverley as well as Burwood. Only an Allan Labor government is getting on with delivering the transport infrastructure that Victorians need now and well into the future.

Land tax

John PESUTTO (Hawthorn – Leader of the Opposition) (14:19): My question is to the Premier. There are reports that the government is planning to expand the growth areas infrastructure contribution tax. What additional areas of Victoria will now have to pay this new tax?

Brad Battin interjected.

The SPEAKER: Order! Member for Berwick, we do not need commentary.

Jacinta ALLAN (Bendigo East – Premier) (14:20): I thank the Leader of the Opposition for his question, because this question goes to an initiative that was announced as part of the government’s housing statement that was released a few weeks ago. Of course the housing statement is all about how we do everything we can to build more homes right across the state, whether it is in the centre of Melbourne, in established suburbs, in growth areas or in rural and regional Victoria. When it comes to the growth areas, one of the things alongside the construction of homes for more Victorians – more people having access to a roof over their heads – is we want to make sure that they have the local infrastructure they need to support the building of the community in which they are living. That is why we are building many, many schools in these growth areas. But we also know that there are local connections that are important: the footpaths, the bike paths, those initiatives that provide access –

John Pesutto: On a point of order, Speaker, on relevance, I get that the Premier has confirmed that there will be a wider tax, but the question is: what additional areas? She has confirmed there will be a wider GAIC – where to? Where will it apply?

Jacinta ALLAN: On the point of order, Speaker, I ask that you rule that point of order from the Leader of the Opposition out of order. Verballing members is not a way to make your point of order. If you do not have a point of substance to make, Leader of the Opposition, do not make one at all.

Members interjecting.

The SPEAKER: Order! The member for South Barwon can leave the chamber for half an hour.

Member for South Barwon withdrew from chamber.

James Newbury: Further on the point of order, Speaker, *Rulings from the Chair* are very, very clear, and can I refer you to page 152. The Leader of the Opposition made clear that the Premier was not being relevant to the question. There is an obligation that the Premier respond in a way that specifically goes to the question that was asked, rather than generally respond. The Premier was not responding directly to the question.

The SPEAKER: Order! Standing orders also say that as Speaker I cannot tell the Premier or any minister how to answer a question. The Premier was being relevant to the question that was asked in relation to expanding growth areas infrastructure taxes and how to pay that new tax.

Jacinta ALLAN: Thank you, Speaker, and I was going exactly to the point about why this initiative is important, because it is about ensuring in the growth areas that local communities have those local connections. That is why in the housing statement there is going to be the allocation for those growth communities through the GAIC, so that we can get on and build these local connections alongside building these new schools and building the road connections the Minister for Transport Infrastructure just spoke of. We continue to support these local connections for local communities.

John PESUTTO (Hawthorn – Leader of the Opposition) (14:23): Why is the government driving up the cost of housing when so many Victorians are struggling to buy their first home?

Jacinta ALLAN (Bendigo East – Premier) (14:24): We know one of the factors that is increasing the cost of housing for Victorians is the issue of supply. One of the ways to address the issue of supply, ensuring that more Victorians have access to more homes where they want to live and the different types of housing options, is we need to build more homes. As a government, whether it is through the \$5.3 billion Big Build program or indeed the additional billion dollars that is being spent in regional Victoria –

Members interjecting.

The SPEAKER: The member for Narracan can leave the chamber for half an hour.

Member for Narracan withdrew from chamber.

Jacinta ALLAN: or indeed the urban renewal program of our public tower sites, we are building more government homes. We are investing in more homes for those Victorians. But what we also need to do is look at doing everything we can to support private industry to build more homes. With the Leader of the Opposition's question, I look forward to his wholehearted support for all the legislation we bring to this place that is about increasing the supply of homes in this state.

Ministers statements: rural and regional roads

Melissa HORNE (Williamstown – Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation, Minister for Local Government, Minister for Ports and Freight, Minister for Roads and Road Safety) (14:25): I know we are all raring to go. We have got a beautiful, sunny Melbourne Cup next week. Plus, do you know what it means? It means it is the perfect time to get our crews racing ahead with vital repairs to our regional road network. Recently I was thrilled to be with my colleagues the members for Eureka and for Wendouree to kick off the Allan Labor government's \$770 million maintenance season. Let us think about that for a second – \$770 million. That is \$2 million a day that we are spending on the

repairs our roads need. We have got hundreds of workers out across the state. They have filled over 370,000 potholes, but we have got more to do.

I know the member for Ripon will be stoked that we are spending \$11 million on the Western Highway after having filled in hundreds of potholes. But it is not just Ballarat. The member for Bass knows how critical the Bass Highway is for her community, and we have got works planned there too. Speaker, even yours and the Premier's communities will benefit from smoother journeys thanks to work on the Loddon Valley Highway. Even the member for Euroa can cool her jets on road maintenance because we are doing works on the Goulburn Valley Highway. And I have not forgotten about you, member for Gippsland South. We are out doing work on your South Gippsland Highway, and I look forward to seeing one of your signature little selfies on your Facebook page.

The past few years have been some of the wettest our state has ever seen. This has taken a toll on our roads, and we are focusing on repairing this damage. But now we have got a guaranteed 10-year funding pipeline of \$6.6 billion so we can futureproof work on our roads and build more resilience into the network. It is part of our commitment to improve connections and make roads better in every corner of Victoria.

Members interjecting.

The SPEAKER: Can I remind members and ministers to speak their contributions through the Chair. Member for South-West Coast, you are warned.

Payroll tax

John PESUTTO (Hawthorn – Leader of the Opposition) (14:27): My question is to the Premier. Central Medical Group has operated in Wodonga for over 30 years, with its nine tenant GPs who help treat approximately 400 patients a day. As a result of the government's health tax, they are looking to move to New South Wales. The Wodonga priority primary care centre only has five GPs. How could they possibly take on an additional 400 patients a day?

Members interjecting.

The SPEAKER: Order! The Minister for Transport Infrastructure!

Jacinta ALLAN (Bendigo East – Premier) (14:28): Again I thank the Leader of the Opposition for proving that we are stepping in and taking action where the former federal government had led us to a system where Victorians cannot access the bulk-billing doctor they need. I thank the Leader of the Opposition once again for referring to our priority primary care centres. There are 27 across the state, and you have discovered the one in Wodonga. I am sure the member for Benambra is very pleased to note that we have increased expanding our primary care services for his community in Wodonga. He looks pretty happy up there. The member for Benambra is looking pretty happy up there, as you could imagine he would. Of course we are not only expanding our primary care services in Wodonga through our priority primary care centre –

John Pesutto: On a point of order, Speaker, the question was about how the priority primary care centre, which only has five GPs, can take on an extra 400 patients every single day. Can the Premier please answer that basic question for the people of Wodonga?

The SPEAKER: Order! The Premier was being relevant to the question that was asked.

Jacinta ALLAN: Of course the Leader of the Opposition has presented a hypothetical, and I am talking in actuals in terms of the expansion of primary care services that we are providing for the Wodonga community. Of course the member for Benambra also knows we are making a significant investment in a hospital for the Wodonga community. I know the member for Benambra knows this well, and I want to thank the Minister for Health for her ongoing work with the Wodonga community, which is not only seeing the expansion of primary care services but also an addition to the hospital services for the Wodonga community. Do you know what is also nice, Leader of the Opposition? The

local pharmacy pilot is also expanding points of primary care – again, in regional Victoria – and particularly where the pharmacy pilot is expanding access to primary care.

John Pesutto: So you have got to go to your pharmacy to see your GP. Why don't you go to your chemist?

Jacinta ALLAN: Do you want to stop and listen for a minute? The pharmacy pilot means that women can go and get their contraceptive pill script refilled without having to go to a GP. Do you know why that is important, Leader of the Opposition? Because women should have access to healthcare like this, which is easily accessible and affordable.

I will go even further, Leader of the Opposition. The pharmacy pilot will also provide advice and support for women with urinary tract infections. Women who go through this experience on a far too regular basis know that having to wait to go in and see a GP can cause significant pain. It can take days. Being able to provide these services through a pharmacy, Leader of the Opposition, means that women can get that treatment sooner, more quickly and more affordably. But of course we are expanding points of primary care through the pharmacy pilot, because we are also going to provide the opportunity for the treatment of mild skin diseases to be seen through the pharmacy pilot and some travel vaccines. This is important. This is happening in other states, and we are learning from these activities in other states, because it is about making sure Victorians can access the primary care services they need when they need them.

David Hodgett interjected.

The SPEAKER: The member for Croydon is warned.

John PESUTTO (Hawthorn – Leader of the Opposition) (14:31): The latest Albury Wodonga Health annual report outlined that Wodonga failed to meet four out of five key performance targets in relation to timely access to emergency care. Given that Albury Wodonga Health is already failing to meet demand, why is the government driving more patients to the emergency department as a result of their new health tax?

Jacinta ALLAN (Bendigo East – Premier) (14:32): As I have said on a number of occasions today – and again particularly for the Wodonga community – we are expanding access to healthcare services. The work at the hospital to upgrade facilities is about supporting our hardworking healthcare workers in Wodonga, who are not just working hard in Wodonga, they are working across the state. Just yesterday we saw healthcare workers being attacked by the member for Berwick. He was attacking the good work that healthcare workers will be doing in supporting alcohol and drug services, and the Leader of the Opposition stood with the member for Berwick to support those statements.

Ministers statements: Veterans Card Victoria

Natalie SULEYMAN (St Albans – Minister for Veterans, Minister for Small Business, Minister for Youth) (14:33): I rise today to update the house on how the Allan Labor government is delivering better transport options for veterans. At the last election we promised to introduce a veteran's card to recognise the service and sacrifice of Victorian veterans, and we have delivered. As of 6 July this year, over 11,000 veterans have signed up for the Veterans Card Victoria. We have invested over \$36 million, and the card is the first of its kind nationally. All current and former ADF personnel are eligible, and Victorian veterans can save on transport costs and more. Right now we have \$100 off car rego, free caravan and trailer rego, and free public transport on Anzac Day and Remembrance Day, and just recently we had free public transport during Veterans' Health Week. As we know, many veterans use public transport to attend services throughout the year. I know the member for Ripon is doing great work with our veteran community and we are getting great feedback from the Ripon veteran community. It is fantastic to hear how veterans are getting on board and accessing the benefits that they need.

Can I also thank Pete and Marcus from RSL Victoria who are here today at Parliament for this year's poppy appeal. As we approach Remembrance Day this year, I would encourage all Victorian veterans to sign up and save with the Veterans Card Victoria. Whether you are travelling to the shrine by train or bus or getting out to regional Victoria for a spot of fishing, camping and caravanning, the Allan Labor government is working hard to get Victorians where they need to go every single day.

Care leavers redress scheme

John PESUTTO (Hawthorn – Leader of the Opposition) (14:35): My question is to the Premier. Twelve months ago the government promised a redress scheme for the more than 90,000 Victorians put into state care. Why has the government failed to honour its promise to these Victorians?

Jacinta ALLAN (Bendigo East – Premier) (14:35): I thank the Leader of the Opposition for his question. The government will be delivering on its commitment to issue an apology to people who have been in care in the state, in historical care, and as I indicated this morning, that apology will be delivered before the end of the year. On Friday I look forward to meeting directly with representatives, as I have in the past, and I know that many others in this house have also met with representatives in the past, because they have campaigned tirelessly and continuously to see this moment come, and we will deliver that before the end of the year. I will provide those representatives with the respect of sharing the information directly with them, because they deserve every ounce of our respect, given their own personal experiences and also how hard they have worked to see a government commit to this apology.

John PESUTTO (Hawthorn – Leader of the Opposition) (14:36): The government promised that hardship payments of up to \$10,000 would be available prior to the introduction of the redress scheme. No payments have been made. Is the government deliberately delaying payments due to the poor state of the state budget?

Jacinta ALLAN (Bendigo East – Premier) (14:37): The answer to that question is no, and I am not going to dignify the Leader of the Opposition's base politicisation of people who have experienced abuse, people who have experienced neglect – abuse and neglect.

John Pesutto: On a point of order, Speaker, we are not going to cop that. The government made a promise. You promised hardship payments and you didn't deliver –

The SPEAKER: There is no point of order.

Jacinta ALLAN: Victorians who have experienced abuse and neglect whilst they have been placed in institutional care deserve our respect, deserve our love and support. They deserve an apology in this place, and they also deserve the opportunity to work with us on co-designing a redress scheme. That is what we will deliver. We will work with representatives of the community. We had hoped that this was something that would be above politics. We will continue to work directly with the community, and we will do this before the end of the year.

Ministers statements: trams

Gabrielle WILLIAMS (Dandenong – Minister for Government Services, Minister for Consumer Affairs, Minister for Public and Active Transport) (14:38): I rise to update the house on the Allan Labor government's investment in locally made trams, the largest investment in Australia's history. Victoria is home to the largest tram network in the world, and this network is part of what makes Melbourne so very unique, which is exactly why we are investing to ensure that trams continue to have a key role in our transport network long into the future. Our A- and Z-class trams have reliably served Victorians for decades, but we are getting on with delivering new, modern and accessible replacements for these high-floor trams through a \$1.85 billion investment and a new fleet of next-generation trams, the G-class, which are spacious, energy efficient and feature a low floor for improved passenger access. Because this government is committed to supporting local jobs and local manufacturing, the 100 new G-class

trams will be built in Dandenong – the best electorate, if I do say so myself – using at least 65 per cent local content and supporting as many as 1900 Victorian jobs.

Importantly, before it hits the tracks of Melbourne, a life-size mock-up of the G-class tram is on display for inspection by accessibility groups, tram drivers, passengers and technical experts to get feedback on the interior layout, the drivers cab and other features so we can ensure that we are delivering the best possible product for commuters. I had the privilege of seeing this mock-up last week at Tullamarine, and I cannot wait to see Melbourne’s new G-class trams begin testing on the network from 2025 before they take passengers on routes 57, 59 and 82 in Melbourne’s west. I am pretty sure that my western colleagues will share in my excitement.

Bridget Vallence: On a point of order, Speaker, regarding constituency question 312 to the Minister for Ageing about elder abuse, I think this is the third time I have raised a point of order about this particular question being overdue. It is about elder abuse, a particularly serious issue. I would appreciate a response for my constituents.

Kim Wells: On a point of order, Speaker, I have unanswered questions: questions on notice 677, 678, 679, 680, 681, 682, 683, 684 and 685, and two constituency questions, 284 and 522.

Brad Battin: On a point of order, Speaker, in relation to question on notice 597, question on notice 596, adjournment 331, question on notice 598 and adjournment 307, this is the third sitting week in a row that we have had to ask for responses on these. If the ministers could please, please respond to my constituents. These are important questions.

Danny O’Brien: On a point of order, Speaker, on constituency questions that are outstanding – 172, 230 and 306 – and also adjournment matter 303. If you could follow those up, that would be wonderful.

Constituency questions

Berwick electorate

Brad BATTIN (Berwick) (14:43): (390) My question is for the Minister for Government Services, and it is: what specific actions have taken place since the media release on 30 June 2022 stating phone reception in Clyde North would improve under a re-elected Labor government?

Point Cook electorate

Mathew HILAKARI (Point Cook) (14:43): (391) My question is for the Attorney-General in the other place. What plans are there for more law jobs to be located at the Wyndham law courts? The Wyndham law courts are being built in East Werribee, across a community that I represent. They are the largest law courts to be built outside of the CBD. The construction includes 13 courtrooms and four hearing rooms and will service the Magistrates’ Court, the Children’s Court and VCAT. The project includes dedicated specialist family violence courts. Every day I watch the construction jobs at the site, with more than 400 workers there presently. I look forward to the Attorney-General’s response.

Euroa electorate

Annabelle CLEELAND (Euroa) (14:44): (392) My constituency question is for the Minister for Housing in the other place, and the information I seek is how many more social and government housing bedrooms will be available in the Euroa electorate as a direct result of Victoria’s big build. With reports that three-bedroom homes are being replaced with one-bedroom homes and the public housing waitlist devastatingly high, there are serious concerns in my community about the availability of housing. More than 65,000 people are on Victoria’s housing waitlist; 37,000 are priority cases. One of these is Crystal, a brave single mother who has waited nearly a year for a safe home for her two children. Her nine-year-old witnessed the fatal bashing of a neighbour and has since received threats. Crystal has had to lean on family to support her where this government has failed to. Reports from

BeyondHousing indicate the waitlist number could be close to double year-ago levels in my local region. In the Mitchell shire your predecessor said 27 new homes have been completed and 60 new homes are underway and in Benalla 26 new homes built and 19 underway. How many more bedrooms will be made available in my electorate because of these?

Albert Park electorate

Nina TAYLOR (Albert Park) (14:45): (393) My question is to the Minister for Youth, and I ask: what is the latest update on the upgrades to the Port Melbourne Scout site at Ferrars Place in Albert Park? The Allan Labor government continues to support young people to learn important life and leadership skills through the Scouts. I was excited to recently join Joey Scouts from across my electorate and discuss with them what this project will mean for them and the scouting community in Albert Park and Port Melbourne. The upgrades will modernise existing facilities and make them more accessible, giving Scout and local community groups in Albert Park a new contemporary home to grow and thrive in, supported by a \$700,000 investment from the Allan Labor government and matched by Scouts Victoria. This investment will help expand our Scouts network in Albert Park and Port Melbourne, empowering thousands of Scouts volunteers who give so much to our local community. I look forward to hearing the minister's response.

Sandringham electorate

Brad ROWSWELL (Sandringham) (14:46): (394) My constituency question is to the Minister for Housing. In March this year I called upon the then Minister for Housing to address the immediate need for rectification works at the Dunkley Fox estate in Highett. Seven months on, no action has been taken. Last Friday I met with residents of the Dunkley Fox estate to discuss the dangers they are being subjected to on a daily and nightly basis. They told me that their homes are filled with termites, properties are vandalised and defaced with graffiti and smashed-up cars and rotting waste lie across the estate. The children's playground is unusable because of syringes and regular drug use. Residents have made numerous calls to Victoria Police because their homes are being broken into, they are being confronted with weapons and squatters are occupying abandoned units for drug production and other illicit activities. Everybody has the right to live safely without fear for their own personal safety or the safety of their family and neighbours. So I ask: when will the minister fix this totally unacceptable situation?

Laverton electorate

Sarah CONNOLLY (Laverton) (14:46): (395) My question is for the Minister for Environment. As of this week our government's container deposit scheme will commence operating right across Victoria. The scheme is an integral part of our circular economy strategy, reducing the amount of waste heading to landfills and increasing the amount of recyclable materials being re-used. From today Victorians will be able to drop off bottles, cans and cartons as they head to their nearest depot site and will receive 10 cents for each one they drop off. In addition to this, three operators, including Tomra Cleanaway, which will be servicing Melbourne's west, will be establishing and operating deposit points, with requirements to make them as accessible and convenient for Victorians as possible. In metro areas like my electorate one deposit site will be required for every 14,500 residents, which is a lot. My question to the minister is this: how will the container deposit scheme benefit my community in the heart of Melbourne's west?

Prahran electorate

Sam HIBBINS (Prahran) (14:47): (396) My constituency question is to the Minister for Housing, and I ask: when will the community room at Inkerman Heights public housing estate in St Kilda be reopened to residents? When I recently met with residents on the estate they were frustrated that the community room has remained closed since the pandemic. The vast majority of residents who reside at 150 Inkerman Street are over the age of 55. Many of them live alone. Many have complex health and mobility issues which prevent them from getting out and about in the community, so having access

to a community room is absolutely vital to ensuring residents can access a space to socialise and take part in group activities. Importantly, during summer and where there is an absence of air conditioning the community room is a space where residents can go to avoid the excessive heat. I urge the minister to ensure the community room is made available and accessible to all residents immediately.

Tarneit electorate

Dylan WIGHT (Tarneit) (14:48): (397) My question is to the Minister for Youth. How has the Le Mana Pasifika project benefited the young Pasifika community in my electorate of Tarneit? In the 2023–24 budget this government announced \$1.53 million in funding to continue to support the Le Mana Pasifika project in aiding over 2000 young Pasifika people per year to stay engaged in their education and in their communities. The passionate volunteers and staff have been working across Victoria to ensure that young people have every opportunity to succeed in their communities. With thousands of Pasifika people in my electorate of Tarneit, it is vital that we have community groups which are actively engaged with the young people in our multicultural communities. I look forward to the minister's response to share this fantastic project with my local community.

Rowville electorate

Kim WELLS (Rowville) (14:49): (398) My question is to the Minister for Police. Minister, when will the Allan government address the rapidly increasing crime problem within my electorate of Rowville? Over the past year the City of Knox has seen a 9 per cent increase in crime – that is currently higher than 60 per cent of all other local councils. Just recently a constituent contacted my office seeking assistance with trying to receive support from police in the area. However, our hardworking police in the Knox area are struggling to deliver a safe community for constituents in Rowville, having continually been grossly underfunded, with a lack of police officers. It is clear this problem is only going to continue to get worse until this government provides adequate funding to the police in Rowville and the City of Knox.

Bass electorate

Jordan CRUGNALE (Bass) (14:50): (399) My question is for the Minister for Government Services. What is the latest progress update on new mobile towers and upgrades to existing ones in Clyde and Clyde North? I note that telecommunications is a federal responsibility and that the placement of mobile phone towers is subject to council planning. I am proud that our government has stepped in to deliver a \$550 million program called Connecting Victoria in order to fast-track and kickstart better mobile and broadband connectivity in as many places as possible, including Clyde in the City of Casey. We know that good mobile connectivity is crucial for access to health care, education and communication in emergencies and that with the changing landscape of employment, many are able to work from home and run their businesses out in the field. This area suffers from almost non-existent mobile coverage. My community continually raises the need for better coverage, and I continue to advocate for them on their behalf.

Bills

Early Childhood Legislation Amendment (Premises Approval in Principle) Bill 2023

Second reading

Debate resumed.

Paul HAMER (Box Hill) (14:51): It is terrific to rise to speak about the Early Childhood Legislation Amendment (Premises Approval in Principle) Bill 2023. This bill is really one in a long line of legislative reforms that the Allan government and the Andrews government before it have made in the early childhood space. Certainly as a parent I have been a beneficiary of this investment over the years, and I see how much of a difference it is making in our community. This bill, again, is really about giving more Victorian families access to affordable, high-quality and accessible kinder and child care, and it tackles certain barriers faced by childcare services in building more centres for Victorian families.

I will just talk about some of the details and background of the bill before talking about some of the specific local impacts. The national quality framework review of 2019 provided a coherent approach to the regulation of the quality of education and care services. This review identified that a proportion of early childhood services premises that were newly built or renovated were not in line with the national quality framework requirements. This bill seeks to address that disconnect between local building and planning laws and the national quality framework requirements and give effect to a recommendation agreed to in a meeting of education ministers. By responding to this issue, education and care providers will avoid the costly post-construction amendments that are required by the national quality framework and ensure the safety of children.

With the important changes that are proposed in this bill, we do expect the number of early childhood services in multistorey buildings to increase by giving services the assurance of having approval in principle, and they will have greater confidence to go forward with building more early childhood services. I think this has a particular resonance with me and my local area, particularly given the growth that is occurring in and around central Box Hill. Already we see a number of childcare centres. I can think of one, which is Little Lane early childhood centre, which is on the corner of Station Street and Thames Street in Box Hill. It was built as a multilevel early childhood facility. I think we will be seeing more of those sorts of facilities and more of them integrated with other buildings.

Box Hill, as I have said repeatedly in this place, is a metropolitan activity centre. It will see significant development occurring in the years to come, and that will bring with it not only a lot of residents but also a lot of workers. And for a lot of workers it is more convenient to have a childcare service close to their workplace – perhaps more so even than close to their place of residence – because they might be certain of the time of day that they are able to arrive at their workplace and leave from their workplace. As part of that, it is going to be important to ensure that along with the commercial businesses, along with the retail businesses and along with the education and health services that are in Box Hill there are also childcare services provided as part of the development of the city.

I think it is also important to note the context of what is happening in the early childhood space across the rest of the Box Hill electorate. I spoke about this briefly in the last sitting week when the bill under consideration dealt with the land acquisition powers of the minister incorporating the acquisition of land for the purposes of early childhood centres. I note that many of the childcare centres and many of the kinders that exist in Box Hill at the moment were built in the 1960s and 70s, when that was the main suburban growth front of Melbourne. In line with the education offering that was provided at the time, many of those facilities are single-room facilities, and they are on quite small parcels of land. A lot of them are on council land, and they are effectively landlocked – surrounded by residential houses. In some cases they are surrounded by open space, other council land, but for obvious reasons council does not want to give up that open space to expand the kinders.

But having single-room facilities makes it incredibly difficult to accommodate all of the needs going forward, particularly when we look at some of the fantastic programs that this government has introduced, such as free kinder and such as the pre-prep program. These programs would increase the demand for kinder programs even if there was no population growth in these suburban areas. So if you add the population growth that is coming and the attraction of families to apartment living and wanting to be close to services and close to places of employment, coupled with the advantage and the incentives that come along with free kinder and the pre-prep program, there is clearly a need for an expansion of facilities. Where an expansion of facilities cannot happen on an existing ground-level site, there are not many opportunities other than to go up and be part of a multilevel facility. I think this is a really important bill in that respect – recognising the challenges that exist in our local communities of being able to implement some of these really important, game-changing projects from an early childhood perspective.

I do want to just briefly end with a shout-out to some of our local kinders, preschools and early childhood centres – they really do an amazing job – and a shout-out also to all of the educators in this space. Their ability to manage a group of 15 or 20 three- or four-year-olds, and sometimes even

younger, never ceases to amaze me – how they manage to keep all of the little ones under control. Reflecting back on my own experience as a parent when my children were that age and going through there, just to see the joy that they came back with after what they experienced at kinder and the learning and growth that they had as people was simply amazing. That is really a tribute to the amazing work that the educators do.

Another really key reform was introduced about five years ago. That relates to the kinder language program. Many of our kinders do have onsite language teachers, particularly in Mandarin. The Box Hill North Primary School have had a Japanese language program in their primary school for many, many years. In 2019, I think it was, they were one of the first to start their in-kinder program in the Japanese language. They are starting all those students one year earlier by having a Japanese language program from kinder 4. With that, I commend the bill to the house.

Jade BENHAM (Mildura) (15:01): I am very, very happy to rise to speak about the Early Childhood Legislation Amendment (Premises Approval in Principle) Bill 2023. Any chance I get to talk about child care I think is very important, and I will take every opportunity. I did listen to the member for Kew with her contribution and some of the comments made. She did reference the Mitchell Institute report, and I will get back to that, because my electorate of Mildura is mentioned in that several times. I will highlight that.

The amendments in this bill establish an opt-in, a voluntary, scheme that allows developers, builders or education and service providers to obtain approval in principle from the regulatory authorities for a centre-based service proposed to be built or renovated in a multistorey building. We do not have many multistorey buildings in my part of the world. There is not a huge amount of need for multistorey buildings, particularly of three levels and above. There are a few, but not in vast amounts. However, making amendments to allow more child care is obviously desperately needed and is something that we support.

Another move that could be made to perhaps enhance rural child care could be – this is a federal issue – when new child care centres are built, making sure there are providers ready to go in. There is a situation in Charlton, and I have spoken about this several times in this place, where a new childcare centre was promised in 2019, it was built and yet 2½ years later it is still sitting empty. As the member for Kew illustrated, there is a workforce of women in particular that that affects in a rural town like Charlton, which is in desperate need of teachers, of nurses and of accountants. There is a workforce on the ground there, but because there is no service provider in that centre these women are unable to go back to work. The nearest day care centres are in St Arnaud, Wycheproof or Donald, which means driving around the entire region for child care. Then there is the staffing issue. Having one service provider so the staff are interchangeable between towns seems like a good idea, and we are working with the Buloke Shire Council at the moment to help establish a service provider for that centre. It is really affecting the mental health of particularly the teachers in the town, who understand there is a huge need. There are teachers leaving in their droves, unfortunately, even though Charlton has got a great school and it has got a great trades program. We are losing teachers in regional areas to Bendigo because child care is available there and not in Charlton, where there is a brand new centre sitting there. So there are provisions to be considered for the centre, but we will continue to work with Buloke Shire Council, who are a very small council without huge avenues to raise vast amounts of rates revenue, particularly in a rate-capping environment, so they are a little hamstrung on what they can do.

The member for Kew also mentioned the Mitchell Institute, and the electorate of Mildura, in its entirety, having zero vacancy rates, was identified in that report from the Mitchell Institute, particularly Red Cliffs. Again it is one of those issues where we do not actually have a centre there. Red Cliffs is 20 minutes to half an hour from the nearest centre, so if parents or carers are living and working in Red Cliffs and having to go into Mildura, an hour each way is obviously very, very inconvenient. It is another thing that Mildura Rural City Council, I know, are working very hard on, and we will be of any assistance that we can.

Those were a couple of issues that I really wanted to raise today, but I also want to send a shout-out. Our days of early childhood education will come to an end after almost nine years, and it is actually quite emotional. We are quite –

Tim Richardson: You'd think you'd have passed by now.

Jade BENHAM: You would think so. Actually I was speaking with a colleague this morning who had dropped his children off at day care at 6:30 am. I went, 'Oh, that's luxurious.' Our child care in Robinvale does not open until 8:30 and it closes at 5, which is great. We have a childcare centre there run by Murray Valley Aboriginal co-op, and we are very spoilt with this childcare centre – very, very spoilt. The member for Box Hill was talking about language programs. This childcare centre, being run by the local Aboriginal co-op, actually have and have had over the years – the past nine or 10 years that we have been involved with the centre – opportunities to teach children the language of the traditional owners, the Ladji Ladji and the Tati Tati, which has been fantastic, and to teach them about culture and the history of the country that we live on. Murray Valley Aboriginal Co-operative do a wonderful job in terms of child care, and we are very spoilt. We really are. The educators within the centre are absolutely phenomenal. We have been lucky enough to have some staff there that have cared for my eldest son and my youngest son, so we have several long-serving staff. It is great. The programs that they put in place there to train young Aboriginal women in particular to get them into the workforce are just fantastic. It is a really good model. There is continuity of care and relationships that the educators have developed with not only the boys but the entire family. It is coming to an end at the end of the year, so it is quite emotional. We will have to celebrate it in one way or another.

But like I said, any opportunity that I get to go in to bat for early childhood care in the regions and particularly in rural isolated towns, I will take, because it is desperately needed. It would open up so many opportunities if we could get our women, mothers in particular, who are desperately seeking to go back to work, to do that. It is just a matter of child care and available spaces. So I will continue to do that. But as has been stated, the amendments in this bill are supported by those on this side.

Darren CHEESEMAN (South Barwon) (15:09): It is with some pleasure that I rise this afternoon to make my contribution on the Early Childhood Legislation Amendment (Premises Approval in Principle) Bill 2023. In reflecting on the elements to this bill and also the values that underpin Labor governments, what I would say is this: Labor very much recognises and values the important role that our kinder teachers and our childcare workers play in the development of all of our children – the children of the state of Victoria. Indeed I very much would like to put on record my ongoing thanks to those kinder teachers and those early childcare workers who work in my electorate of South Barwon and the broader Geelong and Surf Coast regions.

As I have said I think on a huge number of occasions in contributions that I have made in this chamber, my seat of course plays a significant role as Geelong's growth corridor, and we have, as a consequence of that, a huge number of people that are migrating from other communities, from other parts of Geelong or indeed other parts of the state of Victoria to my region to build a home, to have a family and to raise their kids locally. As a consequence of that we, as the Victorian government, have had a huge investment program, a huge pipeline of new investments to our region, to help support those families that have made their home in South Barwon. Indeed we are building, as a part of all of that, new schools and new kindergartens, and we are seeing the establishment and development of a huge number of childcare service providers, who are equally making their way to the electorate of South Barwon, to Geelong's growth corridor, to invest and to provide those opportunities for our young people.

I must say that when Labor are given that great gift of government we always, where we can, prioritise the delivery of these styles of services through the provision of public funding to make those investments to very much value the contribution that education makes to the young people of the state of Victoria. We know that for every dollar of investment we make in the Victorian broader education system the return to the state in years to come is significant. I was very, very proud and pleased as a member of this government, as a long-term supporter of Labor in government, to see Labor bring to

life the Best Life, Best Start program, building on the very proud longstanding kinder system that we have in this state, where we are adding that additional three-year-old year to kindergarten. Of course this means, as a consequence of this investment, that we will see in the years to come young adults finishing their schooling, moving on into either TAFE or university or into the private sector for work, that much better educated, that much more ready for their next steps.

I must say as a father to Isaac and Noah I very much have valued the contribution that kinder made to their development as young people who are making their way in life. And I must say – and this can often be the case – when you get significant population change and growth, often there can be huge challenges in the delivery of these types of services and there can be at times lags in the delivery of the service. That means that for those kids in those growth corridors, whether that be an outer suburban growth corridor like mine or indeed a middle suburbs growth corridor where you have further population shift and further population growth and you see lateral population growth, we need to step in and make sure that we put in place the right public policies to ensure that we do deliver and enable those communities to be livable, provide opportunities for those families to access local services and ensure that when women are ready to return to work there are services that are in place to enable them to be able to do that. That is where this bill is I think important. It is where the reform agenda that our government has been on is important. When Labor is given that great gift of government, we will always prioritise investment in our education systems, because we do believe that having a great start to life is absolutely enabled through the provision of education. Making sure that families have the services locally that they need and making sure that every child has that profound opportunity to get a great start to life is so important.

Our state is growing. It has been growing rapidly for some time. We are seeing population shifts and we are seeing change to the way our state works. This government is making the big investments in Victoria, and I think none are more important than the investments that we are making with respect to our kinders and our schools and making sure that the services that communities need are there. As I said at the start of my contribution, we very much in all of this recognise that important work that our early educators are doing for the state of Victoria. I very much want to thank those that have taken up this career and are making a fantastic contribution to our state. Down in my electorate – again, as I say, a growth corridor – we have lots of young families. We have lots of kinders, we have lots of new schools being built and indeed we have lots of childcare workers. My electorate is full of mums and dads who are working in this space, and I very much want to continue to thank them for their contribution. I very much want to thank them for the contribution that they have made to my boys and to the outcomes of the families that live in and around my electorate. I very much commend this reform to this chamber. I look forward to it passing through this chamber, passing through the other place and of course leading to a stronger education system in this state.

Tim RICHARDSON (Mordialloc) (15:19): Can I say it is a real privilege to be on this bill, the Early Childhood Legislation Amendment (Premises Approval in Principle) Bill 2023, which is another building block in our early childhood reforms. It is a really impressive journey that the Andrews and Allan Labor government has been on, which really is nation leading. Another part of that journey will be how we build to capacity over time, as our communities grow, as our suburbs change and as we bring so many more educators into our sector.

It is worth reflecting for a moment how far we have come. It was this government that brought in a four-year-old 15-hour kinder policy. We know how important that policy is for the wellbeing and growth of our little ones. Those first thousand days are so critical in the development learning journey. As someone who was for a period of time Parliamentary Secretary for Schools and really worked on inclusion during that time, I know that the transition from our early years into primary is a really critical juncture, no more so than for our kids with additional needs. That kinder experience is really important, whether it is screening for additional needs or putting support and services in place, the brain development and learning that comes and then those early childhood educators and that play-based

immersive experience that sets children up for their socialisation, their development and their growth into the future. We know how important that reform was.

We were not stopping there. The landmark report from the UK that talked about the benefits of early childhood education, 15 hours of universal education, did not make a differentiation between three- and four-year-old kindergarten, so one of our policy commitments over the coming years is to roll out 15 hours of three-year-old kinder as well. That at the time was talked down. It was said that it was not going to be possible. We saw the shadow minister at the time and the current shadow minister for education talk about bold ambitions but whether they would be realised. Well, every element of our ambition is being realised and is being delivered and rolled out across our state. I have had the opportunity to open up early childhood facilities and school facilities across regional and rural Victoria, and you get pride and aspiration on every corner of the compass in every postcode when you think of early childhood education and when you think of our investment in this area.

Then we took a policy to the Victorian people for pre-prep – 30 hours of that wonderful, dedicated early years learning that will be rolled out in the coming years. This is again nation leading. Victorians can be very proud when they see the federal government talking about some of the things that we have talked about for nearly a decade in the Andrews–Allan Labor governments. When you see some of the language, the inclusiveness of early childhood education and the talk about investing in the workforce you go ‘I reckon we’re getting the policy right when others are taking that up’. When you see other states and territories taking forward to their elections policies that we announced four to eight years ago – terms ago – you know you are on a winner and you know you are doing the right thing on behalf of your local communities.

But the challenge will come with how we scale this up. We saw the housing statement released and how we are building 80,000 homes each and every year over the decade to 800,000. They are not just numbers on a paper; they are families. They are the communities of tomorrow, and it will be a different way of looking at and engaging with our local communities. There will be diversity in the housing mix, and some of our established suburbs will change over time. We have seen that across the Frankston train line and the Cranbourne and Pakenham lines. We have seen that area change and develop and grow as more families move in and the natural flow of population growth and immigration comes.

But if we are to make sure that we have the early childhood facilities and that quality offering for tomorrow, we need to do the planning now. That is why a policy that looks at in-principle support, that is a national quality framework, is a really important step, whether or not it is multistorey developments that are going through. We have got a few out our way, Acting Speaker Tak, and you know the Suburban Rail Loop will bring the significant new communities of tomorrow and a real diversity in the housing mix and the choice that people have in when they live. That will change that offering.

Instinctively I was wondering how this would go and how it would work. It was not until I visited a premises that was previously a Jeep car dealership on Nepean Highway, Parkdale, that has been converted into an early childhood facility across a few levels that I saw the indoor–outdoor play and the ratio spaces that were achieved. It really opened up my mind to the possibilities even if you do not have a ground-floor allocation for what we would traditionally think of the experience of kinder – that neighbourhood kinder model. That evolution and change has not changed at all the early childhood outcomes for our kids. If anything, it has given that diversity and the different mix and the different opportunities and made sure that we are not landlocked by what is on the ground – we can look at a diversity and mix. That makes perfect policy sense when we see the growth in population coming into the future. To see Good Start open up that premises, that early childhood offering, with a mix of child care was pretty amazing. They had an indoor–outdoor section on the second level, shared as well. It was a play-based space. They could open up the sliding doors. There was grass on that level as well – none of this astroturf stuff, it was actual real grass. It was great to see the kids immersed in that play and that experience – sand play, water play.

We know how important that is for cognitive development for our kids. That play-based learning is not just significant in early childhood, it goes all the way up to year 8 how significant that is for the learning and the development of our kids. I saw it work in that setting, and I thought that once we have some of the development in our activity centres coming through – and we already see that in a number of communities already – it will work if you have the dedication of early years managers, childcare facilities or volunteer kinder associations. If you get that magic right, you can achieve the vision and values of providing the highest quality early childhood standards. Many of the organisations servicing my community are at an exceedingly high level, which takes great pride of place in our community. When you get that right then the setting does not matter – it is then about the outcomes and how those kids will benefit into the future.

It is worth reflecting that the national quality framework was a Rudd–Gillard government era reform, and I know the member for Preston acknowledged Kate Ellis, who was a fantastic representative in this space. There are some policy people in Victoria who had a huge amount of impact on that work and what was achieved. I wonder if they imagined how significant some of those early movements in policy would be and how they would lead the outcomes for Victoria and give us the impetus to go and lead the nation as we see today. That national quality framework was proudly a federal Labor government reform, and being a member of this chamber and this Parliament it gave me great pride to think of the rollout of 15 hours of three- and four-year-old kinder and pre-prep coming online and then the free kinder policy. It is in our DNA to support early childhood education now and into the future.

I am really excited to see our communities change over time. We just had a bill last week that went to the upper house that talked about land allocation as well. This is a really important intersection of the workforce and bringing forward the next generation of early childhood educators, and I say this: whether we are talking about bills on mental health or early childhood, if there is anyone tuning in – and there are probably millions who are turning in to see us in action today; maybe there are some electorate officers who want to transition – for whom early childhood education is an option, it is one of the best careers you could choose. Can you imagine shaping the next generation of Victorians at that impactful level? It is such a wonderful time. For any member of Parliament who has had the opportunity to hear in the words of early childhood educators what it means to them to support the next generation, it is a really amazing profession and experience, and we give a massive shout-out to our early childhood educators. We need, I think, over 10,000 more down the pipeline. So if anyone is thinking what do I do, that is one of the best ways, and you have got a job for life contributing to the learning and outcomes of our next generation.

While we lift up the workforce and while we encourage and support our early childhood educators, we need to make sure that we have got first-rate facilities. With the Building Blocks program, the Shadow Minister for Early Childhood and Education reflected previously on the ambition that this government has set and how ambitious the program is. That is right; it is absolutely ambitious. But then they questioned whether we could deliver on it. All you have to do is see what has been achieved through the Building Blocks program. Unless you are not in your actual community, you would have seen development after development investing in early childhood facilities across our state. Having had the opportunity to visit them not just in my electorate but in regional and rural areas and communities as well, it is so exciting to see them scale up. So to the shadow minister and to the coalition: rest assured, you do not have to wonder, wish and hope; you just have to look at a few budget papers and maybe get amongst your community and see the transformation that is happening right now. The Allan Labor government is building the early childhood facilities for tomorrow. It was Andrews and Allan, and it will continue into the future. It is a really exciting policy agenda, and this is just another wonderful chapter book in the early childhood revolution.

Pauline RICHARDS (Cranbourne) (15:29): I am very pleased to have the opportunity to speak on a really important piece of legislation, the Early Childhood Legislation Amendment (Premises Approval in Principle) Bill 2023. To follow on from a speaker of that calibre, somebody that has taken a role as parliamentary secretary in education and somebody who not just speaks with ease about early

childhood education but speaks with great passion, is always terrific and gives me that reassurance that all of these levers the government has are very much in safe hands. It is an opportunity for me to thank both ministers who have carriage of this legislation. I am very conscious that Ms Blandthorn in the other place is bringing this legislation here in her capacity as Minister for Children, and I thank Minister Stitt in the other place for the work that she did previously and the work that has been brought forward also by the Deputy Premier in his capacity as Minister for Education. I would also like to take the opportunity, because I do not get to do this as often as I used to, to recognise the work of officials from the department and those who are able to work so assiduously hard to make sure that the type of legislation and reform that we have here can really go to what is important for this state and what those levers are. So I am going to take the opportunity to thank the officials who do take that work in service of the public seriously. I would also like to thank the minister's advisers. That is very hard work.

I love the sound of children. I do wake up to the sound of children in the street, no longer the sound of children in my home. Maybe it is the distance of many years since my children were little that gives me great affection for that work. It is a tune that is pleasant to me, but I know that across this chamber – right across this chamber indeed – reform and concern and care for early childhood education and our littlest ones unite us all. We all care deeply. I think the contributions that I have been able to hear today on this legislation remind me of what happens when we are united on this common goal of making sure that what happens next and what happens with our little ones are absolutely a priority. This bill reflects the government's work to improve conditions for families and children. Before I move from the sound of young ones, I do want to acknowledge that today is All Souls Day and last night was Halloween. There are some people who decry Americanisation, and I am not one of them. I celebrate joy in whatever form it comes in, and if that means a bunch of kids walking up and down streets and knocking on doors, I say: long may that continue. I think it is important for us to have our children at the centre of everything we do.

Some of the previous contributions I do want to acknowledge. I do not want to damage the member for Kew's career by praising her too highly, but I will acknowledge what I thought was a really detailed and thoughtful contribution. I was pleased to hear that those opposite are supporting this legislation. I know that what she brought to her contribution was a deep consideration of the bill. I do want to comment on the member for Preston. It did cause me to reflect a little bit on what happens when we have a reformist federal Labor government in the Commonwealth as a partner. It did make me reflect a little bit on some of the other great reforms that we have experienced more recently and with a fairly significant gap. The Rudd–Gillard–Rudd government did undertake extraordinary work on early childhood, and I thank the member for Preston for taking us on that journey. I know the member for Preston cares a lot about making sure that we do have a progressive government.

Of those opposite, having heaped probably career-limiting praise on the member for Kew, I do want to just call out those who say that this is city centric. We have got a lot of members for regional Victoria on this side of the chamber, and to think that the legislation we have does not reflect the diversity of our state – well, the member for Wendouree, as she always does, captured in a really important way the reforms in early childhood. But this is not just about approval in principle for building; this is about the safety and wellbeing of our children and making sure that legislation is harmonised. So I think having so many members for regional Victoria on this side of the chamber and, in other ways, diversity makes sure that – whether it is inner-city members of Parliament, those of us who represent the growth areas, those who represent the west or those who represent the bayside or Geelong – there is plenty of opportunity for us to ensure that legislation does reflect the needs of this state.

This bill was prompted to address common design and safety challenges for centre-based services and providers in multistorey buildings, and it also reflects the recommendations for the Minister for Education and the response to the 2019 national quality framework review for early childhood education and care services to establish a premises approval in principle scheme. This is done through the amendment of the national law, which also mirrors changes to the Children's Services Act 1996. I love harmony. I have realised that I love harmony much more than I had really appreciated. As a speaker

I enjoy harmony in lots of different ways. Certainly I think that having the opportunity to have harmony in our legislation in this great federation of ours is really important, because it does mean, as we are discovering – Victoria is obviously always the leader in so many ways – that we do harmonise our legislation and do use whatever levers are available to us to make sure that we have legislation in place that does make those changes that bring us into line with other states, but it also keeps our eyes lifted up to what is going on in other places and what can be done. That is so important. The amendment bill will ensure the applicant's proposed premises for early childhood services will align with the premises regulations, which will reduce time and cost for correct work.

I represent and serve and live in an area that is really embracing Best Start, Best Life. This legislation really does make sure that with this important reform we have what we need to be able to go forward. It does give me an opportunity to reflect a little bit on my own family story. It is not something I have spoken about a lot. My oldest two were very capable and were able to go through both three- and four-year-old kinder, and I was able to find the resources in my family to be able to fulfil what I wanted. But by the time my youngest child was ready for three-year-old kinder I was not able to financially afford for her to go to three-year-old kinder, and that placed a great burden on me. I think of it as a burden that really tore at me as a mum. I was fortunate to have family who could support me and make sure that that was something I could provide for my youngest, who is now studying engineering. But I do think of it as searing guilt, and I do not want to think of the community I serve as having that searing guilt of not being able to provide for their children the best start in life. The research is clear: we know the first thousand days are really important. This legislation that we have is really important in making sure that that other reform agenda that we have, being led so ably by those ministers in the other place, is really able to be captured. I think that we have this extraordinary track record of providing health, safety and wellbeing for children. We hold this in the highest regard.

In looking at the record of delivery that this government has demonstrated, it is abundantly clear that this legislation has come far from its beginnings, and nor is it the end of our commitment to ensuring positive early childhood outcomes. This matters to our children. During Early Learning Matters Week I visited Aspire early education centre, Imagine kindergarten, Solandra Rise Family and Children's Centre and many more. I am fortunate to have top-notch educators. We have some of the most extraordinary early childhood educators in this great state of Victoria, and I know that Cranbourne is ground zero for those top-notch educators. We put our children at the heart of so much of what we do. The aspiration that our community have for their children is reflected in the way that they make decisions, and I am pleased that this legislation is setting us up so that we can do what we need to. I commend this legislation. I am very grateful to have the opportunity to contribute.

Ella GEORGE (Lara) (15:39): I am pleased today to rise in the house to support the Early Childhood Legislation Amendment (Premises Approval in Principle) Bill 2023. The Lara electorate is home to some of the most incredible early learning centres and kindergartens, and I would like to start my contribution today by thanking every single kindergarten and early childhood educator and support staff across the state for the important work they are doing day in and day out to ensure that our littlest Victorians are getting the very best start to education and the very best start to their lives. On the topic of education, my mum was a teacher. She was a primary school art teacher, a pretty fun job, and she taught me from a young age just how important it is to have great educators and just how important it is to value our educators.

Thanks must also go to the new Minister for Children in the other place along with the previous Minister for Early Childhood and Pre-Prep for their hard work in delivering our nation-leading Best Start, Best Life reforms. On this side of the house we are a government which is truly committed to transforming the early childhood education sector. We understand that providing the best start for all children will ensure that not only they have better skills when they start school but they have more developed social and emotional outcomes and be more likely to sit exams and have higher exam scores. It will also help ease the cost-of-living pressures for families. This will help parents to return to the workforce earlier or get back to studying if they choose to do so. Evidence also shows us that

investments in early childhood education have significant social and economic benefits for those children. We have seen that for every dollar invested the nation receives back \$2 over the course of a child's life. Children go on to have higher productivity and a higher earning capacity. This means that there is a reduced need for government spending over the course of a child's life on health and welfare, and this is one of the many reasons why this bill is so important.

The purpose of this bill is to ensure that Victoria aligns with the rest of the country in adopting the outstanding recommendation of the 2019 national quality framework review, which was approved by all states and territories at the education ministers meeting. As my colleagues before me will have no doubt touched on, this bill will amend the Education and Care Services National Law to establish a premises approval in principle process which will allow developers, builders and early childhood service providers to apply to the regulatory authority for approval in principle of a proposed early childhood service premises if the service premises are to be located in a new or altered multistorey building of three or more storeys including ground level. The bill will also amend the Children's Services Act 1996 to mirror the amendments made to the national law to ensure that the premises approval in principle is available for early childhood services provided in Victoria. Finally, the bill further amends the Children's Services Act 1996 to mirror the infringeable offences in the national law to ensure that all early childhood services in Victoria are subject to the same regulatory enforcement mechanisms.

It is not hard to see that there is an increasing demand for child care and early learning education right across the state. Families are evolving, and we are seeing families needing to have both parents working. With this can come long working hours. Because of this we are seeing an increased need for early learning centres at locations that are convenient for families, often in more central locations, such as the CBD, where families may be working. Due to this we are seeing an increase in early childhood centres that are located in multistorey buildings. At present this accounts for less than 1 per cent of approved centres, yet it does not take a big stretch to imagine that this will increase over time. It is therefore so important that we ensure that we are improving our approval processes for multistorey buildings. This will help applicants to make sure that their proposed premises designs are able to meet the physical premises requirements in the regulatory scheme. It will also help us as the Allan Labor government to deliver our Best Start, Best Life program so that providers are not having to do rectification works. These changes will not be mandatory from the beginning. The approval in principle scheme will be a voluntary application process in Victoria so that the views of the building and construction sector can be considered.

As a local member of Parliament it has been such a rewarding experience to travel around the Lara electorate and visit some of our incredible kindergartens and early learning centres. As I mentioned at the start of my contribution, the Lara electorate is home to many early learning centres and kinders. I believe I have previously mentioned the Korayn Birrale Family Centre in this place, which I visited with the former Minister for Early Childhood and Pre-Prep. 'Korayn birrale' means 'Corio children' in Wadawurrung language. The centre opened in January 2020 and is a state-of-the-art integrated learning and childcare centre providing facilities, programs and services for local families and their children. It houses kindergarten, day care, maternal and child health, specialist family support services and consulting rooms, all interconnected by a central thoroughfare. The centre has strong engagement with the local community. Family service organisations also work out of the site, and it is connected to a primary school. Since its opening, Korayn Birrale has transformed into a vibrant hub for families in the local area, and it is just one example of the early childhood centres that are important assets to our local community across Geelong's northern suburbs.

As I mentioned earlier, our government is leading the way in the nation when it comes to early childhood education reforms, and our Best Start, Best Life reforms are a great example of this. The \$14 billion transformation of our state's early childhood sector will assist our local centres and our local children. Right across the Lara electorate I am hearing the community's excitement about this investment. I am hearing that our government's free kinder reforms are especially important.

Expensive childcare fees will be a thing of the past with the expansion of free kinder, helping families to keep their household costs down. There are also increasing opportunities for parents to re-enter and participate in Victoria's workforce. And 2023 is a really important year for this reform. Being in its first year, this government's \$270 million free kinder initiative is available to all three- and four-year-olds enrolled in participating funded kindergarten programs. This is saving families up to \$2500 in fees per child each year.

John Mullahy: How much?

Ella GEORGE: \$2500 in fees. And given that this year 97 per cent of funded kindergarten services are participating in this program, that means roughly 140,000 children are benefitting from this.

In addition to our free kinder program, over the next decade our government will be transitioning to its pre-prep rollout. Pre-prep will be a 30-hour-a-week program of play-based learning available for every four-year-old child in Victoria. It will double the educational outcomes for children in the year before school. With this reform we are expecting to see an increase in the hours of and demand for our early childhood centres, again highlighting why today's amendments are needed.

In addition to these amendments, the Allan Labor government is also investing in 50 new government owned and operated early learning centres. These early learning centres, along with already established kindergartens and long day care services, will be delivering the pre-prep program. This year's state budget invested \$1.2 billion in kindergarten infrastructure projects – projects that are vital as we expand three-year-old kinder and transition to pre-prep. Importantly, this will go towards the delivery of our commitment to having 50 government owned and operated early learning centres, including new kindergartens on government school sites and low fee paying non-government school sites, creating community hubs such as what we have at Korayn Birrale, which is connected to Northern Bay College. This eases the stress on families and means that more kids can go to kinder and school at the same location, making family drop-off logistics so much easier.

Ninety per cent of a child's brain develops before the age of five. That is why our government's 2023–24 budget sets out additional investment of more than \$1.8 billion over five years in early childhood education, building on our existing \$4.4 billion investment in the Best Start, Best Life initiatives, including three-year-old kindergarten. This takes our investment to date to \$6.2 billion. The Early Childhood Legislation Amendment (Premises Approval in Principle) Bill 2023, along with these investments, is critical to our commitment to transforming early childhood education in this state, because we know the importance of providing the best start for all children, supporting families with cost-of-living pressures and helping parents to get back to work and study if they choose to do so. Early childhood education is at the forefront of education policy in this state, and that is why this bill today so significant. It will allow the Allan Labor government to continue with its nation-leading commitment and nation-leading investment in early childhood education. That is why I support the bill. I commended it to the house, and I wish it a speedy passage.

Iwan WALTERS (Greenvale) (15:48): It is such a pleasure to rise today to contribute on the Early Childhood Legislation Amendment (Premises Approval in Principle) Bill 2023. I was reflecting on the comments of the previous speaker, my friend the member for Lara, who talked a lot about evidence in her contribution. I think about the evidence that has underpinned every single step of the Education State reforms since 2014 and the rollout of free kinder since 2018. I reflect upon the time that I spent in the Department of Education and Training in that period of late 2018 and early 2019 when my friend the member for Mordialloc was at that point the Parliamentary Secretary for Education, and a fine parliamentary secretary he was as well, leading a lot of the reform initiatives of the government through that time, working with then Deputy Premier Merlino and others. It was really uplifting to see the amount of effort and the energy in the department that was rolling out that free kinder initiative. I do want to acknowledge the fine public servants like Pippa Procter and Bronwen FitzGerald and many others who have worked tirelessly for the better part of five years now to see free kinder become a reality across the state.

The reason we have done this is because of the evidence – the evidence that early intervention and providing every child with the best start in life is transformative for their life opportunities and their prospects of success, and we are enabling all of the children across this state to thrive. Early intervention matters, and it matters because it gives those children who may not have had the best start in life otherwise the loving home that every child deserves, and the opportunity to grow up in a literature- and numeracy-rich environment. It enables policy, government services and other delivery mechanisms to make a really positive intervention in the lives of those young Victorians in their earliest years, and enables them to reach school in a position where they are not already so far behind.

That evidence base continues to inform our government's commitment to early childhood education. It informs the structure of this Allan Labor government. One of our new Premier's first actions was to create the new portfolio of children to bring together all of those aspects of early childhood education, of maternal and child health and all of the various forms of service delivery and intervention that we know make a big difference in the lives of children. The Parliamentary Secretary for Children is here and many members of the minister's team are in the house, and I really acknowledge all of them and the Minister for Children in the other place, who is leading so many of these initiatives which have been cultivated by previous ministers but now find their home in the new ministry for children. I think that is a really important step. It summarises, in many respects, our government's commitment not only to early childhood education but to children more broadly and to ensuring that from the perspective of not just moral equity but of productivity and economic growth we are investing in the earliest phases of life, providing children with the building blocks and enabling them to thrive throughout their lives.

The bill itself has been well traversed – responding to design and safety concerns and enabling early childhood centres to be constructed in high-rise buildings of three storeys and above. This is not necessarily a bill that has a particular application in my own electorate of Greenvale, but it does in many other areas of Victoria as densification occurs, as population growth takes place and as there is a continuing need to ensure that service provision keeps pace with that growth. I am sure that the member for Preston, the Parliamentary Secretary for Children, can attest to the need for these kinds of measures to make sure that service delivery is being provided where it is needed most, in those growing communities along St Georges Road and in other parts of the great suburbs of Preston and Reservoir and to make sure that children and families in those growing communities have access to really high-quality infrastructure and early childhood services, because it is not enough to just rely on existing provisions.

The 2019 review of the national quality framework revealed some challenges in the capacity of government, local government and other service providers to construct early childhood education premises in those high-rise buildings. They may have been compliant with certain council planning conditions, but as the review revealed, they could have risked contravening state and federal planning laws, so this bill is testament and reflective of the important work of ministerial councils in creating quality regulation and common policy across the nation. By providing for approval in principle, the changes ensure that future applications to construct early childhood premises in high-rise buildings will have the assurance that their proposed premises designs are adequate to meet the physical premises requirements in the regulatory scheme. They respond to some of the challenges of high-rise construction that I thought the member for Preston covered really well in his contribution – issues around safety and access in an emergency, the provision of light and open space, safe areas outdoors for children to enjoy as they learn by doing and the general amenity of these facilities. Sleeping areas – I am reminded by the father of two – are also very important, as is ensuring that compliance with local planning provisions does not conflict with national and state quality assurance and regulation.

Again, I thank the minister and her team and the minister's predecessors in this space for working so hard with colleagues nationally to align legislation not just within Victoria but between Victoria's legislative framework and that of other states. It is indicative, I think every time a bill comes to this house focusing on early childhood education of just how important early childhood education

investment is to our entire government strategy. It is not just about workforce participation, gender equity and closing the pay gap – although those things are of course incredibly important. These are legislative changes which are good for children, good for parents and good for families. They constitute, as I have said before in similar debates, landmark micro-economic reform because of their capacity to lift productivity, improve the skills base and give young people the best chance to succeed in life. And it is all at a lower cost to government in the long term, as the beneficiaries of this kind of investment are less likely to be unfortunately in positions where they may be long-term recipients of social security payments and there will be lower rates of incarceration – all the kinds of things that we know that can regrettably condemn people to live lives where they are not able to fulfil their potential and not able to thrive.

The economic boffins will tell you that these kinds of investments generate returns on investments of upwards of \$2 for every dollar invested. They are really solid numbers. They are compelling reasons to be investing in this space, and of course we are investing in this space. Last year's budget alone – the 2023–24 budget that so many members in this place have commented on – is a budget for all Victorians. It delivers for all Victorians, and it invests \$1.8 billion to support early childhood education across initiatives like free kinder, pre-prep, three-year-old kindergarten and the creation of Victorian government owned and operated early learning centres as well as co-located early learning centres that remove the need for the double drop-off, making it seamless for parents and children to move from early childhood settings into school, and have that familiarisation with that school before they get there. I think particularly of the outstanding co-located early childhood education centre in my own electorate at Bethal Primary School in Meadow Heights and the new one that, thanks to the minister's investment, is springing up overnight at Roxburgh Park Primary School. These are things that make a tangible difference in communities but also in the lives of individual children and their families.

As I said at the beginning of my contribution, there is an economic and a moral imperative to invest in early childhood education and to improve the connections between early childhood education settings and schools, because children who start behind unfortunately have a tendency to stay behind. If a child arrives at school developmentally vulnerable, they are far less likely to be able to progress and keep up with their peers. Only 12 per cent of students, as I am sure the former Parliamentary Secretary for Education knows, who start school developmentally vulnerable are on track with their peers by year 3. As a former teacher I saw this in the flesh far too often. It was a cause, as I have talked about before, of deep shame and frustration that I could not, as a teacher of year 7 students, do enough to proactively intervene to provide the scaffolding for children to reach their potential, because they had already arrived at secondary school in many cases functionally illiterate and without the building blocks to thrive. That is something that as a government we are not prepared to stand by and allow to happen. It is why these investments are so important. It is why I commend this bill to the house. I thank again the minister and her team for bringing it here, and I hope it has a swift passage.

Meng Heang TAK (Clarinda) (15:58): It is such an honour and I am very delighted to rise today to join the member for Greenvale, and even better to speak after the member for Greenvale as a former teacher, on the Early Childhood Legislation Amendment (Premises Approval in Principle) Bill 2023. This is another important bill and one that demonstrates this government's commitment to improving on our early childhood services here in Victoria. I commend the Minister for Children and also the Parliamentary Secretary for Children for bringing this bill forward.

I am also very excited that the minister will be coming to the Clarinda district next month to join me in visiting one of our very unique early learning centres, the Hoa Nghiem Early Learning Centre. It is a very interesting early learning centre connected to the Hoa Nghiem Buddhist College, which is a primary school run out of the temple in Springvale South. The Buddhist philosophy and the curriculum make the school and the ELC quite unique.

The SPEAKER: Order! The time has come for me to interrupt business for the grievance debate. The member has the call when the matter is next before the Chair.

Business interrupted under sessional orders.*Grievance debate*

The SPEAKER: The question is:

That grievances be noted.

Eildon electorate funding

Cindy McLEISH (Eildon) (16:01): It is tempting to use this opportunity now to raise the appalling state of roads in my electorate and issues such as the person that contacted my office – not a constituent – just today to say that they had hit a whopping pothole on the Melba at Glenburn and that their caravan almost took a 180 degree turn and how they were very fearful of that. And I will not use this opportunity to say how disappointed I was when the Minister for Roads and Road Safety was bragging at question time about the investment in country roads. She mentioned particular highways, but she did not mention my electorate once. It is tempting to talk about the underinvestment in the CFA in my electorate, but instead I am going to start with the funding for small schools in my electorate.

I have a couple of small schools that are in the unique and difficult position of being classified as metropolitan, but everything about those schools shows that they are rural. These two schools are Panton Hill Primary School and the Learning Co-operative school in Hurstbridge, and both of those schools I am quite familiar with. The small school in Hurstbridge, which has a unique approach to education, only has a couple of classrooms, but it is on 17 acres. It does not have water or sewerage services available, and it is classified as metropolitan. The school finds it quite perplexing, because the formula that is used by the government would give it greater money if it was indeed classed as rural. When you have got a very small school like this that has kids that have a number of different challenges, they make some really good inroads with those students. They really offer what they describe as education with a difference.

Panton Hill Primary School – again, it is in a very small town. There is no public transport. It has got a general store. It is very much rural, but the school is classified as metropolitan, and with that comes a reduction in funding. Panton Hill is not on sewerage; they are dependent on a wastewater treatment plan. They do not have access to mains gas; they have to have big LPG deliveries. They do not even have a postal service. They have got a bushfire shelter and they have a bushfire plan, as does the Learning Co-operative school in Hurstbridge. So both of these schools are very obviously rural in very country settings, and the sorts of things that I have mentioned, the characteristics of those schools, clearly demonstrate that.

Panton Hill Primary School does not have an outdoor covered area. They would greatly love that, and they have put in for a grant, because they want somewhere where the kids can be in the shade in summer and out of the rain as well. What they have got at the minute is open. The concrete is not level. It needs a bit of excavation work to extend that and make it into the size of an actual netball or basketball court so it has greater use and a softer surface. I have been there when the kids have had their assemblies for various things, and they have got to sit on the hard asphalt. I think that most schools are beyond that now. When you have got a classification that also limits the amount of funding you can get, it makes it harder for the school to do some of the not-high-cost improvements. That cost, having said that, is about a million dollars, but it is certainly not several million dollars.

I want to also mention the lack of investment in parks in my region. We are lucky that annual reports have popped out today. With Parks Victoria, the total revenue and income from transactions in 2023 was \$433 million and the operating expenses were only \$53 million, so 12 per cent of revenue is what they get. There is such underinvestment. At the end of 2022 Parks Victoria had more than 80 partial and full park closures statewide, many as a result of the October 2022 floods and other natural disaster events, but certainly not all. Twelve months on, flood recovery works have enabled the reopening of 24 parks and reserves that were impacted by recent national disasters, but as of June 2023, 30 partial park closures remain in place. You can have a look on the website and look at how many parks and

camping grounds have closures in place; I am sure every member can have a look at their electorate. I was quite shocked. I had known of a number, but I was unaware of the full extent.

I am going to list these, because the reporting on the website indicates that 26 parks are going to remain fully closed without an open date in sight. We know that around Lake Eildon, the national parks there, they missed out on the school holidays. We want kids to be outside. We want families to be outside. We do not want them locked up in hotel rooms. We do not want them locked up in their own lounge rooms just playing on devices. We want them to be out and about. Impacting the Eildon electorate alone are the Candlebark campground, the Devil Cove campground and the Lakeside campground – they are all in Lake Eildon National Park; the O’Toole Flat camping area and Gap Track Bridge; the Herb Fitzroy day visitor area and toilet block; the Big Peninsula Stepping Stones; the Little Peninsula Bridge is closed; the Phantom Falls walk is closed; the Dom Dom Saddle picnic area toilets are closed; the lower section of the Cumberland walking track is closed; and the Horseshoe Lagoon Flora and Fauna Reserve and Trawool walk-in campground are closed.

These are really popular, and I think the government needs to do much more work to fix up the things that need fixing so that these areas can be reopened and are no longer a danger. I urge the government to have a look at this. Often it is lower level investment – replacing of a track, replacing of a bridge, steps that have come loose, debris that has washed onto the tracks and things like that. Some of it is fairly simple, but I feel very much for the Parks Victoria staff, because they cop it and it is not their fault. The Parks Victoria staff do a great job with what funding they have got, but the government has failed them, failed their employees, at every turn.

Most of the areas that I have mentioned are incredibly popular, and we would like them to be open by Christmas. There are also those flow-on effects to the local economy. Down in the Upper Yarra the O’Shannassy aqueduct trail is a really picturesque trail which is used a lot by walkers and those on bikes – electric bikes or regular bikes – and there is a bridge there that is deemed dangerous. It has been several years now. It is about 800 metres in from the Wesburn end, so you cannot go the full distance. If you start at Warburton, you still cannot go – you have to go part way and back again. That bridge, as I said, has been closed for almost three years. The community are waiting for a solution, and I think they are not very hopeful. The Parks Victoria website says there is a new temporary bypass track in place, and let me tell you, you have to hike down, go along under the bridge and then come back up. Whilst you can scramble to do that, you cannot do that easily with a bike, particularly the weight of an electric bike. At the same time I see the government pushing along with other projects, with the Yellingbo conservation area and camping on licensed river frontage. It is putting a lot of money into driving these sorts of projects but letting our parks fall into disrepair. It is really not good enough.

One of the investments that I did like was the investment at the old Olinda golf course, with the Chelsea Flower Show-winning entry by Phillip Johnson in 2013, I think it was. He has recreated that small display, turning it into a very large display, and it is fabulous. It is really good, and the government helped with that. But Phillip and his family are expected to pay \$100,000 a year out of their own pockets to keep the garden going, and I just do not think that is right.

Golf

Cindy McLEISH (Eildon) (16:10): I want to use the final time allocated to me to talk about golf. Golf is not an exclusive sport, but we have people in this chamber, and political parties – the Greens political party – that want to make golf an exclusive sport. The way they spout misinformation about golf and what it means and what it generates is just simply wrong. Now, we saw today that they want the Melbourne Cup banned, which is just staggering as well, but we have had a lot of activity at Northcote golf course and now at Oakleigh golf course, because the Greens at Monash council are pretty keen to turn Oakleigh golf course into a public park. We just cannot afford to have publicly available golf courses closed down for parks, because we have loads of parks in certain areas.

The figures that I have got here: there are 3.5 million adult Australians who played a form of golf in the last 12 months. Only 14 per cent of those are members of golf clubs. It is not like everybody who

plays golf belongs to an exclusive club – 86 per cent of people do not even belong to a club. And if you are somebody like me that belongs to the Yea Golf Club, let me tell you that is anything but exclusive. We are lucky that we do not have sand scrapes and that we have grass greens thanks to some Japanese investment a couple of decades ago.

At Oakleigh public course there are more than 30,000 rounds of golf played each year. This does not sound as though it is not being used. They have a veterans group, and the pro down there, Sandy Jamieson, who I do know, is such a great pro. He has programs now for golfers with a disability, and he does a lot of work. He also does a lot of work with some First Nations groups, trying to give them access to golf. The green fees at this club cost less than \$20, and you cannot take away somewhere it is so cheap to play a sport such as this.

There are so many golfers who have made the big time who started their golf at public courses, which makes sense. We have Geoff Ogilvy; he was great at match play. He started at Cheltenham. Peter Thomson, a five-time British Open champion, was at Royal Park, just up the road. Stuart Appleby was at Cohuna. Adam Scott – not a Victorian, but he actually started at North Adelaide public course. Cam Smith, whose golf we have all celebrated recently, was at Wantima Country Club; it is a public course in Queensland. Karrie Webb – also at a public course, at Ayr in Queensland.

Of the 3.5 million golfers, 530,000 are members of clubs, as I have said, and 1.68 million people play social golf at public courses like Oakleigh, like Northcote, like Morack, like Keilor Park. The remaining 1.29 million play at other venues, like at driving ranges and indoor simulators, which are the pathways leading them onto courses. We need to make sure that these golf courses remain open to the public, and the more that the Greens push to close them, the more they are forcing people to join golf clubs. And for some people, that is just not going to be affordable.

Golf also has a number of community benefits – in Victoria, \$844 million per annum. That is an economic contribution of \$349 million, a social benefit of \$256 million and an environmental benefit of \$239 million. Social benefits include physical activity – being out there and being active rather than being inactive. The physical health benefits are valued at \$102 million and the mental health benefits at \$106 million, and I think there is no-one who cannot argue that being outdoors on a great day playing golf is physically and mentally great for your health. I know Mark Twain was famously quoted as at some time saying golf is a good walk ruined, but I do not think we all need to agree with him.

The neighbourhood amenity uplift and breaking up of urban spaces is valued at \$48 million. I want to mention also the environmental benefits: flora and fauna biodiversity, \$114 million. I know that certainly at Yea and at many clubs even in the city you do see lots of animals. There are plenty of snakes about – there are always signs up. There are echidnas, there are kangaroos, there are wallabies, there are so many animals and wonderful plant life. The impact of urban cooling – \$35 million. We know about heating up. These open spaces have such a great impact. The flood and stormwater management – you can value that at \$51 million. Water filtration and purification, \$37 million; and carbon sequestration, \$2 million.

You can see there are so many social and environmental benefits of golf, and I think that misinformation peddled by the Greens needs to be curtailed. They need to take a good look at golf as a whole. It is not a sport for wealthy people. It is not an exclusive sport, it is something that we all can benefit from. It just kills me every time I hear some of the comments that are made, because this misinformation should not be out there. We need to get the correct information on the record, and I was very pleased to use this opportunity today to do so.

Cost of living

Josh BULL (Sunbury) (16:16): I am always pleased to follow on from the previous member, who spoke at length about golf. I was going to say that I grieve for anyone that is out on the golf course with me, perhaps at a hole when I tee off and the ball sort of sails off in the wrong direction.

Cindy McLeish interjected.

Josh BULL: Indeed. There probably need to be a few more lessons given.

This afternoon I am very pleased to contribute to this debate and grieve for those that are experiencing cost-of-living pressures right across our state. I acknowledge, and this government acknowledges, the huge challenge facing many in our community due to cost-of-living pressures. It is why this government has a swag of cost-of-living relief measures across a number of portfolio areas, many of which I will touch on more broadly before I go specifically to those within the transport portfolio.

This government has invested significantly in free TAFE after those opposite ripped it up, ripped it apart. Over the last nine years we have set out to rebuild TAFE. We are providing free teaching and nursing degrees – high-quality training and skills for these essential areas. We are also providing first home buyer grants, capped rent rises, bond schemes and of course capped council rate rises. We have released just recently our housing strategy. We have made kinder free, after those opposite ignored it – two years is always better than one – making sure that we are supporting our littlest Victorians to grow, thrive and develop and to be their best. We have delivered the power saving bonus, electricity discounts and the Victorian default offer and are supporting solar and battery energy, because we know energy costs are hurting Victorians.

What I want to do this afternoon in my contribution is, as Parliamentary Secretary for Transport, touch on a whole range of measures within the transport portfolio that are indeed going to provide important cost-of-living relief measures as Victorians face some significant challenges right across our state. I will start with, importantly, our free rego for Victorian apprentices program. We are backing our hardworking apprentices and helping them to ease their cost of living by making vehicle registration free. Apprentices that are eligible for free vehicle registration can save up to \$865 every year. This is a significant amount. It is a \$10 million initiative being delivered as part of the 2023–24 budget. We are making sure that we are putting money back into the pockets of apprentices – of carpenters, of joiners, of brickies, of plumbers, electricians and chefs – if their employer can verify that their vehicle is an essential part of their work. This initiative adds to a number of measures the government has introduced to ease financial pressure for trainees and apprentices – a whole suite of reforms.

Apprentices who need their car for work are already entitled to a 50 per cent discount on their vehicle's registration as part of our trade apprentice registration discount scheme. Over 12,000 apprentices and trainees are currently taking advantage of that discount. That was introduced in 2016 and reduced the cost for trade apprentices needing to use the vehicle for work, and it is a significant and important reform.

Speaking of significant and important reforms, one of the initiatives that we released a number of years ago I am sure, Speaker, in your electorate and electorates right across the state makes sure that we are making car registration affordable for each and every Victorian. The initiative whereby registration is able to be paid in instalments rather than in one lump sum provides significant cost of living relief for many. Certainly within my electorate I know this was very warmly welcomed. Rather than opening the mailbox or opening the email and seeing that significant bill – \$600 to \$800 – we know that being able to break that down into increments is really important when it comes to cost of living, and that is something that this government is incredibly proud of.

I move to the learner and probationary licence online testing, which is now also free, whilst drivers who have not incurred demerit points or committed road safety offences in the three-year period prior to their license expiring benefit from a reintroduction of a 25 per cent discount. Young people across regional Victoria have also been given the opportunity to swap their old cars for safer vehicles thanks to the Labor government's unsafe2safe program, making sure that we have safer, modern and more reliable vehicles and also helping with cost of living as well. It is a trial that aims to replace a thousand vehicles that are over 16 years or older, ensuring we have safety – that is paramount when it comes to our vehicles.

The list goes on. As mentioned today by the minister in question time, at the last election we promised to introduce the veterans card to recognise the service and the sacrifice of Victorian veterans. The minister is at the table, and I did piggyback on the back of the minister's work. The minister joined me recently in my electorate a couple of months ago at our local RSL to talk about this program and the many significant benefits that are provided by it. As was noted today, since July over 11,000 veterans have signed up to the Veterans Card Victoria – a \$36 million investment, Minister. Significantly and importantly when it comes to transport costs, 100 bucks off car rego, free caravan and trailer rego, free public transport on Anzac Day and Remembrance Day – happening soon – and just recently, free public transport during Veterans' Health Week. These are very important measures, initiatives and policies that go to providing those cost-of-living relief measures. We saw firsthand within my community in Sunbury when we were at the Sunbury RSL just how important these programs are, and we certainly know that that is incredibly popular and something that we should continue to deliver on.

When it comes to delivery, regional fare caps – Speaker, I am sure something that is very popular in your electorate – are transforming the way Victorians travel across our state. A regional fare cap is making sure that we are providing regional public transport fares. The cost of the daily ticket on the entire regional Victoria network is now capped at the same price as metropolitan daily fares – currently \$9.20 for a full fare or for \$4.60 for concession. On a weekend or public holiday daily fares are capped at \$6.70 and are currently just \$3.35 for concession. This of course means more money in regional Victorians' pockets and more opportunities for families in Melbourne and visitors across the state to move in and out of the city and to come from regional Victoria into the city – a significant saving indeed.

We know that the cap applies to interstate travel within 60 kilometres of the Victorian border, as well as Albury, Merimbula, Deniliquin and Mount Gambier, to ensure those living in border communities both in New South Wales and South Australia benefit. The cap also applies to all Public Transport Victoria regional buses, town buses and V/Line trains and coaches. It is a significant and important investment, and we know that is not just an opportunity to be able to put more money into the pockets of those that wish to travel from rural and regional Victoria, but also an opportunity for people to perhaps take that education course or perhaps catch up with family and friends or take an opportunity to move around our state which may not have been taken, therefore creating even more economic activity within our state because of this really important reform.

There is a significant list. I am conscious of time, but I just want to touch on that cost-of-living piece, whether it is driving down bills by increasing supply, investing in renewables and bringing back the SEC, as I mentioned at the start of this contribution, or whether it is making kinder free, making sure that our smallest Victorians have an opportunity to have two years of kinder instead of one or our investments in early childhood education and providing those key lessons. I have heard other members speak about the first thousand days, and we know exactly what the research does say when it comes to improving the educational outcomes for young people. Our kinder program is incredibly important and thus far has been very successful.

I have spoken at length about free TAFE. I have spoken about the power saving bonus – the \$250 that has been very, very popular; making renting fairer; support for veterans, as I mentioned earlier; sick pay for casual workers; making wage theft a crime; and of course those many investments that have been driven through the transport portfolio. We know that Victorians are facing many and significant cost-of-living pressures, whether it is the price of petrol or the price of electricity bills. What is important is to have a plan that is dynamic and receptive to the views of the community and to have a plan that works right across all of our portfolios – in education, in health and in transport. I focus particularly on transport given my parliamentary secretary responsibilities, but what we know is that these challenges will continue, and we need to continue to invest. We need to make sure that we are working as closely as we possibly can with our Victorian community, with experts in the field, with those right across departments and with all of our responsible ministers to ensure that we are delivering in each and every way that we can.

We know that those opposite do like to talk about cost of living in some kind of vacuum, in some mythical sphere. They seem to forget that from 2010 to 2014 they had the great gift of being in government. Unfortunately they did not get on and did not deliver those important reforms, many of which I have touched on this afternoon, to drive down the cost of living but also to create more jobs – thousands and thousands of jobs. We heard about the SEC today and those 59,000 jobs. When it comes to investment in many of the projects and many of the initiatives that I have spoken about, there is that opportunity to provide people with the skills they need to get a job opportunity within a local community or a community close to home where they want to work and where they want to deliver. These are really important reforms.

We know that when you are given what is a great responsibility to be in government, you need to deliver across all portfolios, not just focus on one. You must be able to make sure that you are delivering right across government. What we have been able to outline and what we have been able to do is acknowledge and understand that cost-of-living pressures do occur through market forces, but policies, programs and initiatives through many of our portfolio areas – many of the things that I have mentioned in today's contribution – go to addressing a number of these pressures. Does that mean that the work is done, that we are finished and that the cue is in the rack? Of course it does not. It means that we continue to work hard, we continue to listen and we continue to work with all of those agencies and experts in the field to make sure that we are providing that cost-of-living relief as best as we can, because we know the approach of doing very little leads to a very poor outcome for the Victorian community.

This government has a massive plan for this state in transport, in jobs, in health, in education, in our environment, in the things that really matter. It is a bold and visionary plan, yet it is practical, and it is also achievable. We understand our community is facing challenges. We understand that interest rates are rising and have risen extensively, particularly over the past 12 months. We understand that petrol and gas and many of these cost-of-living measures have increased. But having a plan that tackles these challenges head on, both today and into the future, is exactly what we are about. Being a team that is plugged into these issues, as I said before, that listens to and works with the local community, is incredibly important.

That is what we want for the great people of this state. No matter where you live, no matter your background, that is exactly what you deserve: a government that is responsive to your needs, that supports you through the hard times, that has an ambitious plan and that looks forward to the future but also addresses the challenges of today. This Allan Labor government is a team that is focused on doing exactly that. We understand that cost-of-living pressures via market forces and a whole range of other factors are significant and are important to the community, but having a plan that looks at free TAFE, that looks at free kinder and that provides a whole range of transport initiatives, which I have spoken on this afternoon, such as the cap on regional fares, and making sure that we are providing opportunities for Victorians and their families to be their very best is something that I know this team, the Allan Labor government, is incredibly focused on today, tomorrow and of course into the future.

Cost of living

Tim McCURDY (Ovens Valley) (16:31): I am delighted to rise and follow the member for Sunbury on the grievance debate, as he spoke about the cost-of-living pressures. I also want to grieve on the cost-of-living pressures. I do believe the member for Sunbury has rose-coloured glasses. He may have missed out on a few points that are causing the cost of living, and I will make sure that I cover those in my contribution.

We all know that Victorians are hurting because of the cost-of-living crisis in metropolitan Victoria and certainly regional Victoria, and the Allan Labor government refuses to address some of the cost-of-living pressures that are hitting every Victorian. Not only are they refusing to address them, they are actively fuelling some of them. Whether it is energy prices, energy options, tax on schools, health tax,

land tax – you name it, the Allan Labor government have got their fingerprints all over it. You name it, they have taxed it.

The cost-of-living crisis affects all Victorians. Whether you are a home owner, if you rent, if you are a family, if you are a professional, if you are a pensioner or if you are single, employed or not employed, the 52 new taxes hurt everybody. The cost of food, for example – everybody needs food; 8.2 per cent it has gone up. That is through production costs going up for the farming sector; then in turn the cost to transport the produce to market has gone up. The wages to harvest and the manufacturing costs – whether it is energy or wages – have all gone up, and families now need to find another 8.2 per cent of their budget to buy the same food that they bought 12 months ago. Housing has gone up 10.4 per cent. Whether you are building, buying, renting or have got a mortgage – the lot – everyone deserves the respect of a roof over their head, but the squeeze is getting tighter and tighter. The cost of living is harder to survive. The Allan Labor government simply does not care.

The school tax and the health tax are two examples where Labor simply demonstrates this. Education is supposed to be free. Well, you talk to people in my electorate – the Ovens Valley – and they say it is not free when you look at the cost of uniforms, fees and excursions. When you try to put a child through primary school and secondary school it is quite expensive. It is certainly not free. The health system – we are now seeing bulk-billing coming into jeopardy. They are some of the concerns with cost of living that the member for Sunbury neglected in his contribution, so I wanted to make sure I got those on the record.

How did we get here? We got here because of a big bill – that is not the Big Build but a big bill, a massive bill. It is a financial tidal wave that we are facing now, and changing the chairs on the deck of the *Titanic* is only window-dressing. Premier Andrews out, Premier Allan in – we have still got the same debt; it remains. We have still got waste and mismanagement – that remains. We have still got a health crisis – in fact it is getting worse – and we have still got a roads disaster. Substituting Premier Andrews with Premier Allan is the same as substituting the Cain era with the Kirner era. We have seen that movie before, and it did not end well. We all paid a massive price.

Energy costs are through the roof – electricity costs are 20 per cent higher, gas prices 28 per cent higher. People simply cannot make ends meet. It is one thing to be ambitious about renewable energy, but it is another thing to be just plain stupid and bloody-minded in making the targets that they are trying to achieve. It is just putting everybody's costs up higher and higher without doing it as a stepped and staged process. 'Cost-of-living crisis' is not a slogan, it is a fact. But I will tell you what is a slogan, and that is 'Bringing back the SEC'. We heard the member for Sunbury talk about bringing back the SEC, a billion-dollar slogan that is going to deliver absolutely nothing for Victorians. If you ask the member for Morwell, whose seat is in the Latrobe Valley at the heart of the SEC, he says it stands for 'soaring energy costs' – SEC – and I think he is spot on, because that is all we are seeing as we bring back the SEC. Energy costs are up 20 to 30 per cent. The Allan Labor government is motivated by ideology; it is not driven by empathy and care but by Labor thought bubbles. No matter what the cost, the state pays – you pay and your family pays.

Earlier this week I met with Financial Counselling Victoria. They provide counselling services to people in need. They told us about the Australian National Debt Helpline. Calls to this helpline have increased in the last 12 months by 23 per cent across Australia, which is unprecedented – a 23 per cent increase in calls to the Australian National Debt Helpline. They went on to tell us that in Victoria that increase is 47 per cent – that is double the national average. The cost-of-living crisis is biting more and more in Victoria than it is in any other state in Australia, yet the funding remains the same. There are 310 practising financial counsellors across Victoria. All they ask for is another 10 financial counsellors each year for three years, a mere \$1.5 million per year. Labor spill that in a morning, let alone being able to give \$1.5 million to help support people who need that financial counselling. Labor looks away – 'Nothing to see here'. There is a cost-of-living crisis, and Labor turns the other cheek.

If we want to get to the bottom of the cost-of-living crisis, look no further than the 52 new taxes introduced since this government came to power nine years ago. Why have we got these new taxes? Because of nine years of waste and mismanagement on infrastructure, tearing up contracts, massive cost blowouts and cancelling the Commonwealth Games, or the 'con games' as we all know it now – a litany of financial stuff-ups. When Labor run out of money, they come after yours, and Victoria now bears the brunt.

In the 1970s Victoria had a debt of \$6 billion. In 2014 when the coalition left government Victoria had a debt of about \$18 billion. It took 44 years to go from \$6 billion in debt to \$18 billion in debt. Under this government in only 12 years we will be at \$200 billion – in just 12 years. We are not talking 44 – 12 years. It has gone up very quickly. That is nearly 12 times – incredible. You wonder how we end up with a higher cost of living – because they need the tax to get themselves out of this mess that we are in. We have got an interest bill we cannot jump over, so Victorians pay the price of reduced services, less road maintenance and poorer health outcomes. We have got no clear plan. We have changed the Premier, but the problem is it is the same priorities. Swapping Premier Allan in and Premier Andrews out is still a nil-all draw, if you ask me – nothing changes. It is still the same cost blowouts. The Suburban Rail Loop is going ahead – billions of dollars, another ego-driven Premier. As Margaret Thatcher said, sooner or later socialists run out of other people's money, and that is where Victoria sits now during this cost-of-living crisis that all Victorians are facing.

People in the Ovens Valley say to me, 'We don't want another expensive tunnel, we just want an ambulance to come when we call one.' They also say, 'We don't want this ideological state of renewable energy, we just want power bills that we can afford.' The Victorian government is not listening. They need to get out of their caucus meetings, their faction meetings and their union meetings and talk to people on the streets and talk to people in the community, about cost-of-living pressures and see what they tell them. Do not just take it from the notes that you get from the minister; listen to the people in your community. You will find out people are really hurting in your community and my community and every community in Victoria.

On top of those feeling the cost-of-living crisis, we have got those flood recovery victims, and I have spent a few weeks at the Seymour, Rochester and Shepparton inquiries for the floods. We have had them in Echuca and Melbourne. At those recent hearings, people were saying the government has deserted them. Some are still living in caravans, still waiting for help, and they were saying these hearings were the first that they had heard from the Victorian government. And sadly, the only reason why those flood inquiries got up is because we dragged the government kicking and screaming to come to the regions and listen to the people, listen to what happened. But sadly, the MPs, the metro MPs, scuttled back to Melbourne as if nothing ever happened. You do not hear them coming back saying, 'Well, we'll put one of these projects in Melbourne on hold while we get these families back into their houses, these flood victims that need a roof over their head.' It is like they came, they listened and then did nothing about it.

If that is not enough, we have now got Labor's friends in Canberra wanting to do more water buybacks to serve their agenda. Of course we all want healthy rivers, we all want a better environment – but not at the expense of communities. 450 gegalitres is on the federal minister's hit list, and for every hundred gegalitres that leaves our communities, so do 500 jobs. So on one hand we have got a cost-of-living crisis, and one way to get out of that is higher productivity, but at the same time, the federal Labor government is now hitting us, smacking the regions and wanting to take water that will reduce our productivity – not even keep it the same. Minister Plibersek will appease inner-city voters at the expense of regional economies. It does not need to be either/or. It is called coexistence, and we can have both – healthy rivers and healthy communities.

We know Labor cannot manage money. That is a given. It is the same tired Labor show. History repeats itself, and the same people pay. The same business model – and all Victorians pay that price. As we grieve for Victoria's cost-of-living crisis, I look at Victoria's \$4 billion interest bill last year. That was just last year. It will be higher this year and it will be higher next year. We all know that.

That is a given. That was in the report that was handed down yesterday. Currently \$11 million a day – and that is going to head to \$20 million. Currently \$11 million a day – and I look at what we could get for \$11 million a day. In my electorate, in one day, by this time tomorrow, Yarrawonga would have had their final stage of the school finished – \$11 million would have fixed that. In three days time, or by Friday, as Ross and Russ would say, Bright would have its new hospital – in three days of interest bills. By next Friday, I would have 110 kilometres of resurfaced road in my electorate – Cobram to Wangaratta, Yarrawonga to Myrtleford – 100 kilometres by next Friday, just on the interest bill that we are paying on a daily basis. As I say, one Premier has gone, cleaned out the cookie jar, and Victorians are left to clean up the mess. Premier Allan cannot expect a different result if they continue down the same path. Something has to change and it has to change now. If this broom cannot sweep out the cost overruns and the waste and mismanagement, you had better start looking for a new broom. Time is ticking and it is ticking fast. The cost of living is hurting businesses, families and communities.

Cancelling the Commonwealth Games hurt the regions badly. I know the member for Bass would know the Silverwater estate has missed out on hundreds of thousands of dollars for accommodation that was going to come to Silverwater in San Remo. That is gone, and so many businesses around regional Victoria have similar stories to tell. They were planning on that; they needed this business, and now the Comm Games has just ripped it out from underneath them.

Victorians deserve better. They are now relying on Foodshare and they are relying on the Salvation Army, church organisations and community spirit, while our rates go up, our registration goes up, child care goes up and of course WorkCover charges go up as well. Financial counsellors, as I said – 10 new financial counsellors a year for three years at \$1.5 million. It is a no-brainer. The very least this government can do is put on those financial counsellors to give people who are struggling – and that is many – an opportunity to try and resolve the financial debts that they have got.

As Victorians wake up each morning worrying about how they are going to pay their bills, they can have comfort in the fact that the former Premier, who created the \$200 billion mess, is on a golf course somewhere waiting for the bronze statue. Hopefully it will have a mask on it. But I can guarantee one thing: that statue will be over budget and it will be over time. We have seen that movie before. The Cain–Kirner – we have seen that movie. That was in black and white. Now it is in colour and it is on a big screen. It is on a \$200 billion screen. Victorians deserve better.

Housing affordability

Katie HALL (Footscray) (16:45): It goes without saying that housing, the fundamental human right of housing, and its scarcity here and around Australia and indeed the world is the basis of our cost-of-living crisis. Whilst I am going to focus on that in my contribution for the grievance debate today, I do so with hope, because great reforming Labor governments get on and do the work of what is needed – the hard policy work – to make change and to support people.

Successive interest rate rises have put pressure on our communities, so our role as a hardworking progressive Labor government is to do whatever we can to support people who are experiencing rental or mortgage stress. On this side we are the builders and the believers in public and social housing – homes with dignity. Being a part of the Labor movement and the Labor Party means that we believe in safety nets, and we never shy away from the big challenging reforms to make Victoria fairer, no matter what your postcode is. Those opposite, the opposition – and we have heard a little bit today, perhaps too much, about golf – we know what they stand for. They do not care about safety nets, because they are in the party of fend for yourself. Unfortunately, I think the Greens political party has a more insidious approach, because they will tell people that they support them. But when it comes to taking action, especially when faced with the opportunities to deliver action, perhaps on council, and I think in particular of the issue of social housing, we have example after example of when the Greens political party have blocked social housing at a council level. They are constantly running down social housing, but I bet they would not front up and tell the social housing providers or perhaps the specialist

family violence providers or the Aboriginal housing co-ops that their work is not changing lives or is not valued.

People are entitled to safety nets and support. You never know when you will need one. Only Labor believes in social housing. We build it and we fund it because it is fundamental to who we are and our lived experience on this side of the chamber. We know that it is harder than ever to find an affordable home and that more Victorians are renting than ever before. In my community we have lots of renters. I have lived in plenty of share houses and rentals around Footscray. I could probably spend a good portion of my remaining time regaling you all with some of my share house stories.

Josh Bull interjected.

Katie HALL: Well, member for Sunbury, like the quote from *The Simpsons*, it was the best of times, it was the worst of times. It was tough sometimes being in a rental property before all of the Andrews and Allan Labor government's reforms to rental protections. We have the strongest rental protections in the country because we know that everyone deserves a chance to have a safe, secure and affordable home whether you own it or not. The Allan Labor government knows that the best thing we can do to make rental properties more affordable for more Victorians is to build more of them.

As I mentioned, we have the strongest rental protections in the country, but when it comes to protecting renters rights there is always more work to be done to make sure that renters get a fair deal. The share houses I lived in had conditions that would not be legal today, including one with a temperamental diesel heater in the lounge room. I have also dealt with my fair share of dodgy real estate agents. That is an issue that, in terms of our reforms to consumer protections in this state, is so important for people in rental properties. That is why we have worked hard to expand and protect renters rights, with more than 130 reforms already in place.

Through our landmark housing statement this government not only will build 800,000 new homes but will close the loopholes that are driving up the cost of living for renters. This includes making renting fairer by restricting rent increases between successive fixed-term rental agreements to crack down on an emerging trend that I know many of us have seen in our electorates where some landlords evict tenants at the end of their first fixed-term lease to enable a rent increase. This will mean that landlords cannot churn through renters purely to increase the rent. We are extending the notice of rent increase and notice to vacate periods to 90 days, giving renters more certainty of their leases and their finances. We are going to ban all types of rental bidding. I have turned up to rental properties before where rental bidding has been an open thing that people have engaged in with real estate agents, and it is not okay. We are going to be protecting renters' personal information and holding agents and property managers accountable by introducing mandatory training and licensing for industry professionals and introducing tougher penalties for real estate agents and sellers who break the law. We are supporting renters in need by delivering a rental stress support package, establishing rental dispute resolution Victoria, which will take pressure off VCAT, and introducing a portable rental bond scheme to lower the cost of moving between rentals.

These initiatives are in addition to our \$5.3 billion Big Housing Build. This is the largest investment in public and social housing in Australian history. This remarkable reform was initiated by the former member for Richmond, who dedicated his working life to social and public housing. I would like to acknowledge the contribution he made to that landmark policy, one of the reasons I am so proud to be a Labor member and a member of the Allan Labor government. When we have more homes – and we are building 800,000 new homes across the state over the next 10 years – they will be more affordable. Only Labor governments can deliver the protections tenants need and build the homes Victorians need to grow our supply of housing, and only Labor governments will do it.

As part of making renting processes fair, through the housing statement the Allan Labor government will introduce a range of reforms that are directly targeted and continue to expand and protect renters

rights. I have mentioned the fixed-term rental agreements, removing the incentive for agents to evict tenants to facilitate further rent increases, banning rent bidding, protecting renters' personal information and standardising the application process, which has been a source of frustration for many of my constituents. We are extending the notice of rent increase and notice-to-vacate periods to 90 days. Under our reforms rent can only be increased once every 12 months, and rental providers are not allowed to increase rent during a fixed-term agreement unless the lease has an additional term that has been agreed to allowing for an increase. We are restricting increases between successive first fixed-term leases, and that will encourage landlords and renters to negotiate fair increases and provide renters with more certainty over their living arrangements. The government will introduce amendments to give effect to these landmark reforms, the toughest in the country, to protect renters.

The establishment of rental dispute resolution Victoria will enable parties to resolve tenancy disputes in a faster, fairer and cheaper way, with VCAT available only where required. This will encourage early intervention and resolution of residential tenancy disputes prior to escalation to VCAT and before problems become entrenched. RDRV will provide dispute resolution strategies, information and conciliation services. This will be separate and complementary to VCAT. The design of the RDRV will be done in close consultation with VCAT and rental groups to ensure that smooth referral pathways and collaboration take place, and of course Consumer Affairs Victoria will continue to investigate rental providers who engage in deliberate or systemic breaches of the legislation. I strongly encourage any Victorian who has been subject to an unfair or egregious rent increase to get in touch with Consumer Affairs Victoria for advice and to better understand their rights or to contact their local MP, because I know that we have been helping renters in our electorate office to engage with Consumer Affairs Victoria.

The minimum rental standards have meant that there is a good safety net for renters in Victoria, but like I said, it can always be better. This government has always stood up for Victorian renters, which is why we introduced 130 reforms to make renting fairer. These reforms have allowed more renters to make modifications to their rentals, removed no-reason notices to vacate and prevented Victorians from having to choose between their pet and their rental property. Our reforms have also introduced minimum standards to provide safer, more energy-efficient housing for renters, and we know that boosting the energy efficiency of rentals is one of the best tools we have to drive power bills down. On this side of the house, this Labor government will keep working hard to support renters, ensuring renting is fair, is secure and is comfortable. They can rely on a progressive Labor government that will always back them in. While we know that some of these reforms are in place already, the new reforms announced in the housing statement will make them the strongest in the country.

Consumer Affairs Victoria takes breaches seriously. Again, rental properties that do not meet the standard is what Consumer Affairs Victoria is there for. CAV investigates rental providers who engage in deliberate or systemic breaches of the minimum standards, and further action is taken where appropriate. Estate agents advertising non-compliant residential properties may also be subject to regulatory action.

I know for many renters that buying their first home is something that they aspire to, and this government also has a proud record of using the tax levers we have available to us to support first home buyers. No government has done more to help first home buyers trying to get into the property market than this government has. It was this government that increased the first home buyers stamp duty exemption. Under our landmark Homes for Victorians package, first home buyers purchasing a house that costs \$600,000 or less do not have to pay any stamp duty, while concessions apply for purchasing costs of up to \$750,000. Our support for first home buyers in the last financial year included more than \$660 million paid in first home buyer stamp duty exemptions and concessions and more than \$120 million paid in first home owners grants, and since we introduced the Victorian Homebuyer Fund less than two years ago, we have committed more than \$1 billion to help homebuyers through our shared equity scheme, now being copied by the Commonwealth.

I could go on with further examples of how this government uses the tax system to support the efficient use of our housing stock and make housing more affordable, but what I would like to conclude on is a recent announcement which relates to an issue in my electorate of Footscray around land banking. Footscray has a heap of prominent sites in its CBD that for many years have been vacant. This year I have run a campaign around getting the developers to take action to build to the permits that they have been granted by council and to clean up their sites, because what that will do for Footscray is deliver more housing, more rental properties and more affordable housing under our housing statement, and that will transform Footscray. So I was really pleased that we introduced a tax on land bankers in the last week of Parliament, because this is something that my community has been calling out for. The developers have had it too good for too long and have let Footscray go into a state of disrepair.

Biodiversity protection

Ellen SANDELL (Melbourne) (17:00): Today I would like to spend some time speaking about biodiversity and nature here in Victoria, because it is something that rarely gets talked about in this Parliament. This is a grievance debate, so I guess what I am doing is grieving for what we have lost and talking about how we might be able to protect what we have left. Here in Victoria we now have a new Minister for Environment, Minister Dimopoulos, taking over from Minister Stitt and Minister D'Ambrosio before her. I would like to welcome Minister Dimopoulos to the position, and I really hope he is excited about taking on this new role, because there really is a lot of important work to be done that could make a big, positive impact.

Nature is something that Victorians value really incredibly highly. It is not for no reason that homes next to the beach or on the edge of a park are more expensive than those that are not. It is not for no reason that our beaches, national parks and campgrounds are chock full during holidays. It is no accident that our top tourist attractions are seeing the little penguins or seeing animals at the zoo or driving along the Great Ocean Road. It is clear evidence that Victorians value nature and the wonder of our biodiversity. More than that, we need nature. We need everything that it gives us: clean air, water and other essential elements of life, not to mention how it feeds our souls.

But the sad thing is that by all indicators we are still making decisions here in Victoria that destroy nature at record pace. The last Victorian government *Victorian State of the Environment* report was in 2018. Back then none of our biodiversity indicators were classified as good, more than half were classified as poor and the rest were fair or unknown. In the latest update, last year, 2021, several indicators were moved from fair to poor, so things are getting worse. In the parliamentary inquiry into ecosystem decline a few years ago it was revealed that 2000 species and communities are now at risk of going extinct in Victoria. This year we are due for a new *State of the Environment* report, and I am worried that this report will show an even greater decline, because over the last nine years since I have been in Parliament I have seen time and time again decisions made by this Labor government that deprioritise and defund the environment and biodiversity and, worse than that, decisions that actively destroy nature, often to support vested interests or money-making ventures. But as the Cree saying goes:

Only when the last tree has died and the last river been poisoned and the last fish been caught will we realize we cannot eat money.

So today I want to put on the record some of the policies and programs that Victoria could fund and implement if they wanted to reverse the trend and start to not only protect but actually restore our beautiful biodiversity here in Victoria. I want to start by acknowledging the traditional custodians of the land we now call Victoria and their custodianship of this land for tens of thousands of years. For tens of thousands of years people lived in harmony with the land, taking what they needed but understanding how to ensure that humans did not take too much from country which sustained them and their culture. For much too long we have not listened well to our First Nations peoples and their deep knowledge about country, and it is something we need to do a lot better.

To start off I want to talk about our nature laws. The Wildlife Act 1975 sets the laws for how people interact with wildlife in Victoria and how wildlife is protected. These laws have not been updated in

45 years. Three years ago, in 2020, the government promised to review them, notably after some serious breaches, such as mass killings of Bunjil, wedge-tailed eagles, and reports of wealthy overseas tourists being enticed to Victoria to shoot wombats for fun, which then was legal.

The Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988 is also a piece of legislation that governs how governments are required to protect our threatened species. It is also not working and urgently needs updating. We understand this has been part of the review. However, three years on and the government is yet to respond to this review or make any changes. What is the hold-up? These pieces of legislation urgently need updating, yet the government seem to be sitting on their hands even after many, many people have put in thousands of hours of work. The government need to release their response now. The Parliament also held its inquiry into ecosystem decline and made some very useful and important recommendations, but the government is yet to respond to these, and I am hoping the new minister will make these a priority.

Secondly, I would like to talk about funding. *Biodiversity 2037* was launched in 2017, six years ago. It is the government's road map for improving biodiversity in Victoria. It is a good road map, but so much of it relies on the government actually funding the things in it, from invasive species management to research programs for the protection of threatened species, and a plan is no good unless it is actually implemented. Unfortunately that is what we are seeing here in Victoria: a plan that looks good on paper but has very little funding behind it. And it is something we are seeing again and again.

When it comes to decisions from this Labor government about funding for nature, nature is consistently deprioritised. One example of this is the Nature Fund, a fund that was set up to help biodiversity projects on private land, which is the large majority of land that needs conservation in Victoria. Before the election it was given \$10 million – not a lot, but we were happy that it was set up, and we hoped that it would receive more funding in future rounds. But then in the last budget there was nothing. A few months ago an announcement was made for \$3.5 million – I am sorry, but that is a pittance, especially when you look at what other states are committing to their similar funds. New South Wales has committed about 100 times what Victoria has, and Queensland about 10 times, to similar funds. It is not just this project that lacks funding. I hear again and again from people, including inside government, that biodiversity programs get knocked back again and again at budget time. We even had an Auditor-General's report recently which showed this too. That is because the government does not want to fund protecting biodiversity over things like new train stations, where they can cut a ribbon on something tangible and get a lovely photo in the paper.

The Victorian Labor government needs to change its thinking. Protecting our biodiversity is vitally important. I would argue nothing is more important than sustaining life on earth. Yes, the government has committed some money to individual programs, for example, captive breeding programs at the zoo and the anti-predator fence at Wilsons Promontory. They are all very good programs; there is no question about that. But this needs to be scaled up significantly, and we cannot just focus on one small area or a few animals released into the wild. We need a change in thinking and a change in funding prioritisation to reverse the decline in biodiversity across the board. We need significantly more funding for invasive species management, for example, which is probably the biggest cause of biodiversity decline after climate change and habitat loss and which we are doing very poorly on in Victoria, from deer to pigs to rabbits to invasive weeds and new threats about to reach us like fire ants. We are not putting enough money or regulation towards stopping these, and we are being overrun. We need to get in early, and where we have not, where emerging threats have already taken off, we need governments to significantly scale up their efforts, not just throw up their hands and give up. We need properly funded recovery plans for endangered species to protect and restore remaining habitat as well.

On habitat, I want to acknowledge the momentous end to native forest logging and talk about what needs to happen now. Earlier this year the Victorian government brought forward the end of native forest logging, which means we will not see large-scale commercial logging from 1 January next year. This is momentous. The work of thousands of activists and community members over decades led to this decision, and they should be commended. As a student I became a forest activist. It is ultimately

what led me to get into politics, because I simply could not see the sense – and Victorian governments, both Labor and Liberal, did it – of allowing the wholesale destruction of our beautiful biodiverse native forests, all to make cheap paper to profit a small number of large companies, when it was actually subsidised by the Victorian taxpayers. We were paying to log our own forests. The scale of the destruction was unfathomable, and I am so glad that we finally won this fight.

But as with most decisions this government makes, the devil is in the details to come. In many parts of the state, like the forests in the west, such as the Wombat State Forest and others, logging continues under forest licences and often under the guise of storm debris clean-up or fire preparation work. But the science shows that a lot of this logging actually makes our forests more fire prone as well as killing threatened species and their habitat.

What needs to happen from here? Firstly, VicForests needs to be disbanded immediately. VicForests are the government-owned agency that have been found repeatedly to have broken the law and logged illegally and even illegally spied on ordinary citizens who stand up to them. They must have no role in forest management going forward. Instead our forests need to be permanently protected for their biodiversity and cultural values, and this must be done with First Nations communities central to their ongoing management and protection.

We need to end commercial logging of native forests across Victoria, not log them under the guise of something else, and fix the way that fire is managed in Victoria. Under intense political pressure both Labor and Liberal governments have ramped up hazard reduction burns over the years since Black Saturday in 2009. Make no mistake, the Greens support evidence-based, planned hazard reduction burns to protect life and property from fire, but burning has often become more motivated by politics than evidence. Good scientific evidence now shows that large-scale burning in our native forests actually makes forests more flammable, not to mention it kills threatened species and destroys habitat, affects our health and air quality and pours carbon into the atmosphere. We need to rely on science to set our burning regimes and on cultural knowledge from our First Nations communities who have managed fires in the landscape for tens of thousands of years. We need to look critically at what will protect us from fire, including better investment in our rapid detection and firefighting capacity. Luckily many of our forest logging workers have the skills we need to protect us from and prevent fire and can be redeployed to do this vital work.

A lot of what I have spoken about today looks at systemic issues, at changing our laws and prioritising nature more, but there are also some fixes that could be done immediately that would make a big difference, and I am hopeful the new environment minister will move quickly on some of these. For example, currently in Victoria you can walk into a Bunnings or supermarket and buy rat poison. There are several different types – it is really hard to tell the difference – but some of them have ingredients that are killing our wildlife. When rats or mice eat them, these rats and mice are then eaten by birds such as owls and birds of prey. The poisons build up in their bodies, eventually killing them. It is a huge problem and killing many, many animals and birds in Victoria. Some of the poisons do not do this – they do not build up – but some, the second-generation rodenticides, as they are called, do. They need to be banned from sale in supermarkets and in Bunnings and only used where necessary, for example, in agriculture. They have already been banned in Europe from sale in supermarkets, for example. Why not here? It would be a simple measure with a big impact.

The way that permits are issued for killing native animals, for example, is another important thing that needs fixing, with the government having seemingly very little oversight over who gets permits to kill animals like kangaroos or koalas and the impact this is having on those populations. We can fix this system.

It does not escape me that the biggest threat to nature and biodiversity is climate change, and it is no secret that the Greens have been fighting hard to stop the biggest cause of climate change, fossil fuels. Yet an independent report just released shows that the Victorian Labor government provided \$70 million in fossil fuel subsidies last year, and Labor are actively supporting many fossil fuel

projects: approving gas drilling near the Twelve Apostles, lifting the ban on conventional onshore gas drilling across Victoria, extending the life of our brown coal power stations and signing secret deals to keep them open and operating long after the market is likely to close them – the details of which are kept secret from the public – and now the Treasurer is travelling to Japan to provide support for a new brown coal project to make dirty hydrogen in the Latrobe Valley.

The government is allowing seismic blasting to look for more oil and gas off the west coast of Victoria, killing sea life like whales and lobsters and deafening whales – a deaf whale is a dead whale – not to mention desecrating sacred sea country against the wishes of local First Nations communities. We need to stop seismic blasting, and the Victorian government have the power to do so if they have the political will. It goes without saying that none of this support for fossil fuels can happen if we want to protect ourselves from climate change and protect our biodiversity. Labor needs to stop supporting new fossil fuel projects or any projects that support them. It is that simple.

I could do a whole speech just on the issue of Victoria's terrible decisions on the Murray–Darling Basin plan, where so many decisions have been made in favour of vested interests and against putting more water back into the river, as is needed, even putting them at odds with Tanya Plibersek, the Labor environment minister at the federal level.

In conclusion, Victorians care deeply about our environment. We are nurtured by it. We want our governments to protect it, and people will vote for it. I hope today I have provided somewhat of a road map for what the government could and should do differently, and I hope with the new minister that they will.

Cost of living

Darren CHEESEMAN (South Barwon) (17:14): I rise this afternoon to grieve for Victorians and indeed Australians who are struggling at the moment with the cost-of-living pressures that exist in Victorian and Australian communities. These cost-of-living pressures that exist in our households throughout Victoria are in fact fuelled by a whole raft of circumstances that are completely and utterly outside of the control of those households.

People listening to this speech will no doubt recall that earlier this year we had a global conflict break out in Ukraine, and when that conflict broke out it led to all sorts of inflationary pressures across the global economy with respect to fuel energy prices. We have also seen play out, in very much an Australian and a Victorian circumstance, floods, and we have seen bushfires, and these pressures have seen the cost of producing food and making it available to Victorians and Australians rise, again fuelling cost-of-living pressures in Victorian households. The Andrews Labor government of course have recognised these cost-of-living pressures by putting in place a whole raft of different policy responses to ensure that we can put, wherever possible, downward pressure on the cost-of-living pressures that households are facing.

We have also seen over the last 12 months or so the Reserve Bank of Australia respond to inflationary pressures in the Australian economy by lifting interest rates on a huge number of occasions. This is fuelling cost-of-living pressures at the household level as people respond to their mortgages rising or indeed as they respond to paying more rent because the landlord is responding to those mortgage pressures that they are under.

The Andrews Labor government and indeed now the Allan Labor government have a whole raft of public policy responses that we are putting in place to help Victorian households in responding to these cost-of-living pressures, and I want to go through a few of those this afternoon. What we are doing is putting in place free kinder. Free kinder reform will make a huge difference – a \$2500 a year saving to households who have kinder-aged kids in Victoria. If you think about the profile of those that have kinder-aged kids, more often than not they are new home owners who are starting that journey of home ownership. They have mortgages or they have rent, and helping those households by putting in place

free kinder will save those families significant amounts of money, which will help them in getting through those cost-of-living pressures that do exist.

We are also putting in place free TAFE courses, particularly in areas where there are skills shortages in the Victorian economy. Those free TAFE courses will of course save those young Victorians a significant amount of money but importantly ensure that we have the skills that we need to build a modern Victoria going forward, and that will indeed over time reduce inflationary pressures that exist in so many different parts of our economy.

We also recognise what education does to the productivity-enabling capacity of the state of Victoria, and we are adding three-year-old kinder, giving those young Victorians and their families the necessary skills that they need to go on a lifelong journey of education. Again, that will free up the capacity of our economy, and for every dollar we invest in those young Victorians from an education perspective we will see a great dividend return to the people of Victoria.

We also recognise that energy prices have been a significant challenge for many Victorian households, and that is why we have got things such as the power saving bonus, giving the tools and the opportunity to every single household in this state to be able to seek cheaper energy prices, cheaper power prices, for their households. This is all about making our economies as strong as possible, providing the balance sheet to households to ensure that they can get through these cost-of-living pressures that exist in our community.

In my seat, and when I look around many parts of Victoria, we have significant communities that are growing. In the context of South Barwon we have lots and lots of families that are making their way to South Barwon, and we see that in the growth corridors around the outskirts of Melbourne. The Andrews Labor government was and now the Allan Labor government is putting in place the investments we need to ensure that those communities living on the outskirts of Melbourne have that opportunity to access the education that they need to be able to access locally. That is why we are building new primary schools. That is why we are building new secondary schools. That is why we are funding and providing the opportunity for councils to make those investments to build kinders locally. The reason why that is important, the reason why we need to do that, is that if families are able to conveniently access schools and kinders locally in their neighbourhoods, they will be able to cheaply and easily access those schools without having to put lots of petrol in the car's tank every single week and we will be able to help drive down the cost-of-living pressures that those households might be funding, and that is of course really, really important. From my perspective, responding to cost-of-living pressures needs to be done not just in the context of right now but also by putting in place the productivity-enabling decisions to ensure that for future challenges that come along and face our state we are that much more capable of getting households through.

Another thing that I am particularly proud of and another significant thing that our government has done is that it has funded the establishment of free teaching degrees. This is important because we need more teachers in our Victorian government system. It is important because we know when we look at the age profile of teachers in the state of Victoria a significant portion of those fantastic teachers are indeed baby boomers and will be looking forward to retirement in the near future. We know that the greatest way for us to recognise that challenge and to recognise the opportunity of getting fantastic people trained to be teachers, to train the next generation of teachers in this state, is to provide them with the opportunity to get free teacher training, because we want to do that. We want to make sure we have got fantastic teachers in this state and we want to make sure that they are incentivised to go and teach. That is why we have done that.

Equally, whenever I go and visit a hospital and I go and talk to our fantastic nurses in this state, I see the challenges that they are facing every single day. Our fantastic teachers and clinicians got our state and our country through the global pandemic, but we know that we need more people taking up that great opportunity of becoming nurses in this state. Again, we see a significant number of our nurses in Victoria as people at the back end of their working lives. That is why we have stepped up to that

great challenge and incentivised people to go into nursing in this state by again providing that opportunity for people to get free nursing degrees. This is all about getting more people trained as nurses into our Victorian public health system, working to keep us safe and working to make sure that Victorians have the very best access to our medical services.

When I reflect on these things, what I see is an Allan Labor government making important investments for the people of Victoria, not only in terms of getting through the immediate cost-of-living pressures that our state, our country and indeed the globe are facing but also recognising and responding to those challenges to make sure Victoria is the best-placed state going forward. When I reflect on what the others might do if they were given that great gift of government, what I would never see is investments that they would make. What I think we would only ever see are the things that they would do, which would be to cut our TAFE training courses, to close our TAFEs and to cut important things such as education maintenance allowances.

We invest. We recognise the importance of Labor governments investing in Victorians. That is our approach, but we do know that when the coalition are elected, they go after Victorians. They make cuts. They close the important institutions that our state needs, those important institutions that give Victorians the skills that they need to be able to make the best life that they can in this state. We invest. That is what we do. That is why we are so proud of the investments that we make, whether it be in free kinder, adding an additional year to kinder, free nursing, free teaching or making sure that we have got 80 courses where people can go off and get a TAFE qualification for free. These are the things that we will always do when we are in government. Always we will do that, but when they are in government, when the coalition have that great opportunity, all they ever do is make cuts and closures.

Albury Wodonga Health

Bill TILLEY (Benambra) (17:30): I rise to make a contribution this afternoon, and I grieve for the people of the Benambra district and surrounds, who are among the more than 300,000 people under the care of the Victorian government run Albury Wodonga Health. Let me get straight to the point on this: (1) Victorian taxpayers are forking out \$225 million to put lipstick on a pig for this health service, (2) a redevelopment of the Albury Base Hospital will deliver no guarantee of additional beds, (3) a do-it-yourself job on ground so poor that buildings have moved up to 60 millimetres, floors have fallen and walls have tilted has, in layman's terms, broken the building's spine and (4) a makeover at the Albury campus of Albury Wodonga Health was preordained by bureaucrats against the best advice of medicos, independent consultants, engineers and the public.

Albury Wodonga Health is a cross-border health service straddling the Murray River and serving the people of Wodonga, Albury and the surrounding districts of north-east Victoria and southern Riverina New South Wales. It is the only cross-border health service in this nation. Two states contribute to the costs, but hospital campuses on both sides of the river sit under the management of the Victorian government. The recently renegotiated intergovernmental agreement between the two states now extends until 30 June 2035, so putting that in context, it is about another 12 years or, simply put, almost another three terms of the Victorian Parliament. But the decision to jointly spend \$450 million on the Albury site raises serious questions around how the Victorian and New South Wales governments arrived at this point.

This almost borders on malfeasance and possibly misconduct in public office. I do not make this claim lightly, and it is not an idle claim. It is made after examining something like 2000 pages of documents: (1) emails between the two state departments and Albury Wodonga Health bureaucrats, (2) secret master plans prepared by consultants at a cost of millions of dollars that were seemingly ignored, (3) engineering reports that talk of bad and unstable ground where ceilings are at risk of collapse, (4) admissions by the geotechnical consultancy used to evaluate Albury as the potential site of the main border hospital – this consultancy never left its office once and used soil and core samples from another development some 2 kilometres away rather than using soil samples from the site of the development of this hospital and (5) capital investment proposals and budget submissions obtained

under the New South Wales Parliament standing orders – effectively a documents motion – that are solely related to Albury when planning for the future was still open to all options.

These documents suggest that New South Wales and senior management at Albury Wodonga Health had absolutely no intention of building the border's much-needed new hospital on anything but the existing Albury campus, and all of that despite its well-documented limitations, its history of unstable ground and the greenfield build recommendations by workshops and a master plan in December 2021. This Victorian Labor government has either been hoodwinked or turned a blind eye to what was happening directly under its nose.

On 3 December 2021 – this is an important date for so many reasons, and I will explain that during this contribution – this document, the Albury Wodonga Health master plan, was completed by a company named Conrad Gargett, recommending a greenfield building. At the end of this contribution I will make all of these documents that I have available to the house. It was also about two months, going back to that date of the master plan, after the New South Wales government had already decided a new hospital on a greenfield site was not on the table and that it would just redevelop Albury Base Hospital into an acute and subacute centre for Albury Wodonga Health.

On 6 October 2021, in briefing notes for a ministerial letter, senior NSW Health bureaucrat Vince McTaggart provided advice to the Parliamentary Secretary for Health that resulted in correspondence that said the New South Wales government was not considering the establishment of an additional hospital in the region. A month later Mr McTaggart is an apology but copied into the minutes of a site location workshop as part of the master planning process that found a clear preference, an absolute crystal clear preference:

... emerged for the greenfield option to locate the acute and sub-acute facility

What is apparent from those documents was that no-one was telling any of the stakeholders involved in the development of the master plan that the deal was done – that no matter the result of the master plan, a brownfield build at Albury was locked in. On 10 November 2021, still a month out from the master plan's recommendations of a greenfield site, meeting notes prepared for the New South Wales health minister and New South Wales Treasurer reaffirm their aversion to anything but building on the existing Albury campus. At that time Janet Chapman, the deputy CEO of Albury Wodonga Health, was also pushing for the Albury brownfield site, undermining the board and the master plan meetings, and so was the Victorian Health Building Authority executive general manager, planning and development, Stefano Scalzo. Now, Scalzo and McTaggart were emailed by the then Albury Wodonga Health CEO Michael Kalimnios on a lazy Sunday afternoon, 21 November 2021, asking for their help at a board meeting later that week to promote the way forward for a brownfield site.

We know that the board was supporting the greenfield option. We know that. We have spoken to them. They have made public statements. Two weeks later, in December 2021, the master plan is delivered. It is not made public, going much against all the pushing back from both Victoria and New South Wales. We had to wait until August this year, 2023, some two years after, as a result of a documents motion in the New South Wales upper house by Dr Amanda Cohn. That document is a real master plan, showing in detail bed numbers required now and up to 2040. This 84-page document talks about other potential sites, constraints of existing sites, traffic, parking, drainage and most significantly recommends a greenfield site be pursued. Two weeks ago, on 16 October this year, that is two years since the original master plan that I have spoken about, Health Infrastructure New South Wales, on behalf of this Victorian Labor government, trotted out its version of a master plan. It was nothing – no detail, no bed numbers, no idea really other than to erase 29 years of history, learnings and evidence. This was just another example of how out of touch these faceless, unelected bureaucrats had become.

Just days after the release of this pathetic excuse for a master plan, Albury Wodonga Health provided an update on a separate project – the expansion of its emergency department. Now, in the local Albury Wodonga Health Facebook post they boasted of a workbench that had taken 40 hours to polish by hand. Seriously, who cares when we are so desperately in need of a better health service rather than a

stone bench. I have said this before and I will say it again: I could not care less whether this new hospital is built on a barge in the middle of Lake Hume or whether it is built in New South Wales or Victoria. I do care that the hospital is absolutely fit for purpose. There are no other excuses.

The 2021 master plan makes it clear that neither the Albury nor Wodonga hospitals were or are the future. Buildings and operating theatres are not fit for purpose. There are risks to patients' safety. There is asbestos all the way through the Wodonga campus. It also highlights the Albury campus is built on a highly reactive clay soil prone to movement and that one building has already moved 60 millimetres. Surely that should have set off alarm bells to a government planning to invest \$225 million in a multistorey building on that site. A briefing note to the Albury Wodonga Health executive dated 4 May 2022 warns of the risks and dangers to the 20-bed medical ward 2, which I just spoke of, which had moved those 60 millimetres because of unstable ground. This information was not made public and clearly did not get to the premiers of both New South Wales and Victoria, who five months later stood on the site lauding the choice of the Albury campus for a \$450 million redevelopment. That is \$225 million from each state jurisdiction – just the first stages of a much larger project for an acute and subacute hospital.

Reports suggest the slab was underengineered. It has not been fixed yet, or the cost of that fix has not been made public. Now, I have said this before: these reports describe the site as 'consisting of highly reactive clay soils which may experience high ground movement from moisture changes'. We have had three years of rain. Possibly we are heading for a drought, but who knows. The two health departments, including Victoria's, are planning a billion-dollar investment here – multistorey medical buildings and car parks. What does the total cost to build on bad ground do to the bottom line of the services that the people of Albury–Wodonga and the wider area deserve? Well, I can confidently tell you that it was never considered to be part of the planning process. The costings in the 2021 master plan, evaluating the costs of greenfield and brownfield options, specifically excluded additional costs from abnormal ground conditions.

The experts tell me directly – and you can find that in the documents – the fix will not be cheap. It is as cost prohibitive now as it was in 1994 when the Albury Base Hospital was first relocated to this very site – shifted from central Albury to the existing site – which is now the Albury campus of Albury Wodonga Health. I have spoken directly with the architect who worked on that project. It was designed first to be a four-storey hospital as planned, and then the geotechnical advice came in. It was as it is now: highlighting the fact that the Albury campus site has soil that moves, and it moves a lot. There is 4.5 metres of loose fill beneath some buildings – 1½ storeys of unstable ground. The 1994 design was reduced to a series of ground-level buildings – I earlier said there were initially four storeys reduced to single storeys – spread across the building envelope on the site of the now Albury campus of Albury Wodonga Health.

The reason for the design change was cost. The cost for the footings, the pierings and foundations for anything taller than a single storey would have blown the budget. The architect tells me that the only way forward in the future for the unfunded stages is to demolish before you rebuild. Health Infrastructure NSW briefed the council on exactly that two weeks ago. Now, why none of this has been picked up in the planning process over the last 29 years, heaven knows. Did the bureaucrats championing the brownfield build at Albury know, did they ignore it or were they just blissfully ignorant? Well, for a start, the consultants engaged to do the geotechnical report submitted in the 2021 master plan never left their office and never picked up a handful of soil on the Albury campus site. In fact one of the samples they used was from the Quest hotel development some 2 kilometres away, which I mentioned earlier in this contribution. The two premiers fronted the media on 27 October 2022 in Albury and said they were transforming health care for people in Albury–Wodonga – that these would be 'world-class' facilities providing the 'very best of care, now and into the future'.

With the remaining time that I have, we still have something like 3500 people on the public elective surgery list. For a fortnight in the last month non-urgent surgeries were cancelled because – you guessed it – we do not even have enough beds there at Albury Wodonga Health. The glossy pictures

produced as a poor imitation of a master plan two weeks ago give no idea of how many beds would be added to our hospital. Plenty are telling me that there will be no increase. How does this help those waiting for elective surgery? The 300,000 people in the catchment who rely on this health service are not fools. We know we need a large, single-site hospital and we need it now. But what they want is the detail. They want to know exactly what they are getting for their \$450 million and how much of that will be needed for the foundations and pierings on this site.

Until such time as our community sees documents that contain a similar level of detail to the master plan from December 2021, then we should press pause – stop – and not waste another cent. Someone needs to stump up and tell us – show us – why the greenfield site recommendation was shafted. They need to tell us who gave those health authorities the green light to pursue the Albury brownfield development against all independent recommendations and the public need. If they acted alone, they should be held to account under the offence of misconduct in public office. If it was the health minister and her cabinet colleagues, then I grieve for them too.

State Electricity Commission

Nina TAYLOR (Albert Park) (17:45): My grievance is the opposition's philosophical objection to state ownership of energy. I did hear a reference at some point in one of the speeches to Margaret Thatcher, and I think that sort of sets the scene for a pretty clear differentiation, I should say, from this side of the house – and a little bit around there as well – and the opposition, just putting it out there, and also, can I say, a deep resistance to the clean energy transition. They say 'Yeah, yeah, yeah, we want to transition, but' – there is always a 'but'. Whether it is about electrification, whether it is about moving away from the reliance on gas, there is always a 'but'. Or perhaps we go nukes or whatever it is in all the thought bubbles that they throw out there – anything they can do but support the clean energy transition. Then on the other hand we have the Greens political party, who are all about the fight – they will hold up the placards – but not about the fix. They just do not have the ticker to do the grunt work which we are doing, which is well underway with the SEC.

A further point I want to make, coming back to the opposition, is I do note that the member for Morwell said he – and I paraphrase – does not know what the SEC is all about, and I thought, you know, you could actually google it. I mean, the Minister for Energy and Resources, has she not been up-front and out there talking about the SEC? In fact I remember through the whole election campaign we were pretty up-front and forward about it. But to be the devil's advocate, if you type in 'SEC Victoria', guess what, there are all these explanations about exactly what it is and what we are doing. We are very, very transparent on this front. I hope that offers some assistance to the member for Morwell and perhaps a little curiosity. I think the real point is he does not want to know what we are doing about this, because there is such resistance from the opposition. If he wanted to know, he might actually google it or listen to the minister for energy or in fact any number of colleagues –

Luba Grigorovitch: Speak to the minister.

Nina TAYLOR: Yes, speak to the minister. We are very happy to discuss this topic. We are proud of making this important investment and the transition – the transformation – of our energy sector. I just have to put it out there that I think it is about where the will is, and the will is definitely on this side of the house – and, I should say, a bit around there as well – to make that clean energy transition. And that is exactly what we are doing.

We have not mucked around either, let me tell you, because the SEC strategic plan was released on 26 October 2023. We are absolutely up there and at 'em with this. And what does it do? What are the core elements? It commits the SEC to invest to accelerate the energy transition – tick, that is extremely important, and I will come back to that point; become a one-stop shop to help Victorians electrify – therein lies a trust element, and I will come back to that point as well; and build the renewable energy workforce. So you can see here, looking at all the elements that are required – on the one hand having a strategic plan but also the mechanisms to actually implement that change – the grunt work is well underway, because you do need a workforce that is equipped and able to deliver on the transition all

the while putting downward pressure on bills through more renewables and supporting home electrification.

I also heard the opposition saying ‘Labor doesn’t understand cost of living’. I think nothing could be further from the truth, and actually a big imperative for the clean energy transition and in fact state investment in the energy sector is all about driving down energy prices but also delivering on our emission reduction targets for the benefit of the whole community as well. And just to provide some more detail for the opposition, because even if they are not enthused yet, hopefully they will come on this journey, the SEC will manage the Victorian renewable energy target contracts, ensuring every public school, hospital, police station, train and tram is powered by 100 per cent renewable energy. This is the other thing where there is a little bit of a difference on either side of the house and around this corner as well – I am just pointing out the differences; I just have to put it out there. When I speak to people in my community, they are very excited about the transition to cleaner energy, because on the one hand, who likes pollution? Nobody likes pollution, and essentially, when we are talking about emissions, that is really what it is. And pollution is not good for anybody. Even the kids, when I go to schools, are very passionate on this topic, because they know that their future relies on this, not only when we are talking about clean energy jobs but also so that they have a planet that is truly livable.

We know that the State Electricity Commission will initially invest \$1 billion towards delivering 4.5 gigawatts of new-build renewable energy projects by 2035, the equivalent replacement capacity of Loy Yang A. Therein you can see the precision within which we are implementing these very important changes. We are not winging it; this is very precise because we have directly measured what is required in terms of energy needs and output compared to the old coal-fired power industry. And I should say, the first pioneer investment will be announced by the end of this year.

I was talking before about the emissions reduction targets. The SEC will help deliver our nation-leading renewable energy and emissions targets of 95 per cent renewable energy by 2035 and net zero by 2045. At the same time you can see that this is the whole story and this really pertains to our Labor values, because it is not only about delivering for the environment, it is not only putting downward pressure on bills, it is also about generating jobs now and into the future – we are creating 59,000 jobs and increasing gross state product by about \$9.5 billion. This is where I do not get the philosophical opposition to the changes that we are implementing in Victoria, because they just make economic sense. I would have thought the opposition would at least be interested in considering the economic advantages of this transition, but I guess when you are locked into a philosophical objection to anything that is not in the private market and you do not really get climate change, well, hence we have the opposition.

A member interjected.

Nina TAYLOR: Well, that is my interpretation, and am I wrong? No, sorry, but I do not think I am in this regard.

So we have committed to establish – and I was talking to the jobs now and into the future – an SEC centre of training excellence backed by a \$424 million energy and training package to help workers upskill and to create 6000 positions for apprentices and trainees. This is what I am talking about when I am looking at the grunt work; it is about pulling all the pieces together that are required to implement this kind of massive transformation in the energy sector.

I want to come back to the pragmatic issue of moving away from our reliance on coal-fired power stations, and I do sense a continuous theme from the opposition about resistance to this idea. We know a lot of those power stations are getting pretty old, and we know the impact on surrounding communities. It is well documented in terms of the pollution that they have had to endure. On the one hand I would like to express gratitude for the workers who for decades have provided much-needed energy for our state. I do not want to disrespect the work that has been provided through that industry, but at the same time we are moving for good reason to the renewable energy sector. We know those old coal-fired power plants are not efficient, and actually the market is driving this. This is the other

point. It is really a good economic decision to make this transition. It is not just a nice idea; it makes good sense when you are looking at your economy.

Coming back to the issue of climate change, I did speak before to the issue of pollution and the impact when we are looking at things like asthma and other aspects of our oxygen quality levels – flora and fauna. But even if you strip that away and even if the environment is not a passion for you – I hope it is, but even if it is not – when we look at our increasingly unstable weather patterns impacted by the stark increase in emissions, we know this impacts water supply, food and oxygen, which are the fundamental elements for human beings to be able to live well on this planet. So there are really good imperatives for making this change on so many fronts, even at a minimum, when we are talking about cost-of-living elements.

Another aspect that I do want to speak to is this issue of trust. I did say before that the SEC will be a one-stop shop to help Victorians get access to the information and support they need to electrify, because it is not necessarily innate in all of us to understand what that process requires and the costs et cetera involved and what kind of equipment. These are the kinds of very specific needs that our consumers in Victoria deserve to be supported with – that is, through that process – and that is exactly what we are setting up the SEC to do. It is hard to know where to go for trusted information and what services you can access. I am pointing out something fairly obvious, but I know myself at times when I have reflected in the past on different power companies, you do not know – ‘Am I getting a good deal?’ I mean, I know we have the Victorian default offer we have already implemented and, when we are talking about the cost of living, a number of legislative changes that have brought about more mechanisms to support consumers to have faith in the decisions they are making, or confidence, I should say, that they are getting the best possible deal within the market as it is. So the SEC will play an important role as a one-stop shop to help Victorians get off fossil fuel gas and electrify, and the SEC will start with pilot solutions next year before rolling it out to all Victorians.

Talking about the cost-of-living issue, let me just dive in there. Victorians can save around \$1400 per year on their energy bills by switching to all electric and can double that by adding solar. Double – who knew that there were cost savings in renewables? Well, there is no secret; no-one is hiding this data. It is actually very accessible. The Victorian renewable energy contracts will be managed by the SEC from 2025, and the reason I am pointing out these elements is so that I can be emphatic about the transparency of this transition but also just provide the evidence – if more evidence was actually needed – that the grunt work is well underway to make this transition.

So Victorian renewable energy projects will ensure the Victorian government meets its commitment for all government electricity to be 100 per cent renewable. I think this is one of the inherent and significant elements of the SEC transition in terms of what it will deliver for Victorians, and I know at the election this was certainly received very well. In candid conversations in community, I did not hear anyone say ‘Oh, no, don’t transition to 100 per cent renewable energy through the SEC – don’t do that’. No. Let me tell you, nobody said that. They said, ‘That sounds like a really good idea.’ And the government will be the SEC’s first customer. The SEC will then look to retail, commercial and industrial customers.

Coming back with another further point – I have enough time to acquit it when it comes to cost-of-living elements – the SEC will push wholesale energy prices down by bringing on 4.5 gigawatts of power. I just want to reiterate that point because that is significant – replacing the equivalent of Loy Yang A through renewable energy projects.

In the few seconds that I have remaining I just want to bring it home with the gas transition. All-electric homes are cheaper to run, better for the environment and healthier for the families that live in them. So what does it mean? Converting an existing home with solar panels from gas to electricity can save around \$1700 a year on energy bills in addition to around \$1000 of savings per year from an existing solar system. For Victorians in a new all-electric home, going all-electric will save them around \$1000 a year on their home energy bills. Those savings can increase to over \$2200 when paired with rooftop

solar. This is the jewel – all new all-electric homes do not need to cost any more to build than gas-connected homes. Hooray.

Question agreed to.

Bills

Early Childhood Legislation Amendment (Premises Approval in Principle) Bill 2023

Second reading

Debate resumed.

Meng Heang TAK (Clarinda) (18:00): As I mentioned before the break and to the Minister for Children previously, we are an extremely diverse electorate in the district of Clarinda, as is Victoria more broadly, and we are a proud and diverse state. So it makes sense that we also have diversity in our education institutions. The Hoa Nghiem Buddhist Temple, the school and the Early Learning Centre (ELC) are just another example of our thriving diverse community, which is something that I am very proud of. I am also very proud of the government's broader investment in the temple and multicultural infrastructure in our community and across the state. We have committed over \$50 million to building, upgrading and renovating new community infrastructure for multicultural and multifaith communities. Under the program we have invested \$250,000 towards delivering an upgrade for the Hoa Nghiem Buddhist Temple for Victoria's Vietnamese community in Clarinda and Melbourne's south-east.

I am really looking forward to visiting the ELC with the minister next month. I know that the acting mayor of Dandenong and the ward councillor will also partake in this visitation. I thanked the minister for taking the time to make that happen and also for her work in bringing this bill here today. It is an important bill, one that will amend the Education and Care Services National Law to establish the premises approval in principle scheme for new early childhood services in multistorey buildings to address design and safety issues commonly experienced with centre-based services premises in multistorey buildings. As mentioned, it is another bill that demonstrates this government's commitment to improving our early childhood education system.

There is also much happening. Victoria has led the nation in early childhood education and care, and that is evidenced by some of the general reforms that have taken place over the past few years. The Best Start, Best Life reform is really a transformational one, and so is free kinder, which is extremely important for my community. The cost of living is a major priority for many communities here in Clarinda district. Importantly, free kinder will save families up to \$2500 in fees per child per year. It has also provided the much-needed relief for family budgets and will give more women the choice to return to work, a huge priority for families in our district and in our region.

I would like to take this opportunity, because we are talking about early childhood education, to say that my wife Manette – after five years of being a full-time mum and after Sofia turns three next week – is completing her early childhood training. She is at her placement now, so she is really looking forward to working as an educator, joining with many of our former educators here but as an early childhood educator, which I am very proud of. That is just a brief snippet of how proud I am in terms of our government's commitment to early childhood education, which has enabled full-time mums to return to work with assistance during this cost-of-living crisis.

In 2023 approximately 97 per cent of funded kindergarten services, which is more than 2750 services, are participating in free kinder, which will benefit up to 140,000 children. Again, I am very proud that 140,000 of our youngest will be given the best start possible. Talking about the best start possible, we will also benefit from pre-prep over the next decade, a new universal 30 hours a week program of play-based early learning for four-year-old children. Children in the City of Melbourne will also be able to access pre-prep from 2030, starting at 16 to 20 hours each week, and from 2032 all children

across Victoria will be eligible for 30 hours of pre-prep each week. That is extremely exciting and something to really look forward to.

Right now there is also an expansion taking place in kindergarten programs across the state, with the creation of 50 government owned and operated early learning centres to address childcare shortages in areas of greatest need. It is really exciting that we will see at least two of these centres in Noble Park and in Dandenong, and all centres will be open by 2028. So there is really so much happening here. The investment under the Best Start, Best Life reforms is something that I am really extremely proud of, and it has demonstrated the Allan Labor government's commitment to investing in our children and young people and in our education system.

We see that continue here today with this bill, the Early Childhood Legislation Amendment (Premises Approval in Principle) Bill 2023. The bill is largely technical in nature, and we have heard contributions from both sides that it is a straightforward bill. But it is important to support the delivery of the infrastructure required for the landmark reform, which I have spoken about, under the Best Start, Best Life program, and it does that by preventing the need for rectification work to be undertaken at the completion of the works.

Overall the bill will give effect to eight recommendations agreed to by the education ministers meeting on the 2019 national quality framework (NQF) review to establish the premises approval in principle scheme for new early childhood services in multistorey buildings. By providing approval in principle, the changes ensure that the applicants will have assurance that their proposed premises design is adequate to meet the physical premises requirement in the regulatory scheme. Therefore it is a fairly straightforward but important change that will help provide assurance and security in the design of projects and, importantly, protect the safety of the young children in the services.

I have mentioned there are changes to the Education and Care Services National Law Act 2010, but there are also corresponding changes to the Children's Services Act 1996 to maintain alignment with that national law to ensure that all early childhood services in Victoria operate under the same requirements.

Finally, from consultation the scheme reflects the consensus position of all participating jurisdictions, as agreed by the education ministers meeting in response to the 2019 NQF review. I wholeheartedly support this amendment, and I commend the bill to the house.

Chris COUZENS (Geelong) (18:08): I am pleased to rise to contribute on the Early Childhood Legislation Amendment (Premises Approval in Principle) Bill 2023. As the member for Clarinda has just said, this is a pretty straightforward bill, but it is a very important one for us to deliver in providing childhood services in this state. I want to begin by congratulating the new Minister for Children, Lizzie Blandthorn in the other place, and also acknowledging the incredible work of Minister Stitt in the other place. We are very lucky to have those two ministers working on such an important area as members of the government.

Population growth brings great responsibility in providing these childhood services, and the demand for early childhood services is only increasing. We have strong population growth right across Victoria, and this is about continuing our investment for childhood services and ensuring future generations have the best early childhood experience, which is really important as a government, in delivering that.

I also want to acknowledge and thank childcare workers and staff for the valuable work they do. We certainly value the important role they play in children's lives. We know how important that is and how important it is to ensure that we are providing the right facilities, as I said, for the population growth. I know in my electorate of Geelong that population growth is unprecedented, so we know going forward that we will have to be looking at more and more of these childhood facilities.

The primary purpose of this bill is to give effect to a recommendation agreed to by the education ministers meeting in the 2019 national quality framework review to establish a premises approval in principle scheme for new early childhood services in multistorey buildings. Providing approval in principle will ensure that applicants will have assurances that their proposed premises designs are adequate to meet the physical premises requirements of the regulatory scheme. This will enable changes, when they are required, to designs and building plans to ensure the completed premises and buildings meet the regulatory requirements in the national quality framework, including those aimed at protecting the safety of young children in emergency evacuations or ensuring adequate supervision in a service. The proposed changes in this bill will allow for these changes before the commencement of construction works, avoiding the time and cost of rectification works once the premises are completed. This also provides certainty for developers that are building this infrastructure.

It is also about laying important foundations early in life. Whilst less than 1 per cent of approved early childhood services are located in multistorey buildings, the number of proposals for early childhood services in multistorey buildings is expected to increase over time. I am not aware of any childhood services in multistorey buildings in my electorate or in fact in the Greater Geelong region, but what I am very aware of is the increase in our population – the number of young families that are moving into the Geelong region – and that there is likely to be a demand for those multistorey buildings going forward. In some of our areas where facilities are landlocked there is not the available land, particularly in the inner Geelong area. I note that the City of Greater Geelong have raised as a potential opportunity going forward multistorey facilities in childhood areas but also for schools because of the demand that we are expecting to see. Victoria's economy is number one right across this country, and it is because everybody wants to live in Victoria – obviously. We are doing very well, and it was great to see Victoria jump from number five to number one, but as I said, along with that comes increased growth in our communities because people are wanting to move to regions like Geelong and many other areas in our state. We are very proud of that.

In my electorate there are many early childhood services providing affordable and high-quality kinder and child care. Only recently the minister and I visited the Bannockburn Family Services Centre to announce funding to expand their capacity. Again, in the Bannockburn area there is a huge growth of young families moving in. There are new housing developments that are attracting people to the affordable housing there, and obviously with young children they are going to want to access those services. Their expansion over the next couple of years will enable them to take on an additional 140 children, which is incredible. These expansions will modernise and ensure that services fit community expectations and are what the children deserve, obviously. We need good-quality facilities.

Communities across the state are excited about the Best Start, Best Life reforms that we have introduced as well. Victoria leads the nation on early childhood education and care. We have committed \$14 billion to expanding kindergarten programs across the state under our Best Start, Best Life reforms. The 50 government owned and operated early learning centres initiative is an ambitious plan to address childcare shortages in areas of greatest need, but we also need to be looking at childcare workers, which we know is really important. Of course we have introduced the free TAFE courses, so anybody wanting to do a childcare course can enrol in the free TAFE courses that are on offer. That is a really important way for us to address the need for more childcare workers in our communities. Geelong is no different. We have strong demand in our communities as well and the need for more childcare workers, so we are really pleased with that initiative, and Gordon TAFE in Geelong are providing that course, so that is great news.

Where possible the early learning centres will be co-located with schools to avoid the double drop-off. In some cases they may be co-located with services like maternal and child health services and playgrounds. In my electorate Rendine Constructions are building the modular kindergartens that are being distributed right across Victoria, which is fantastic. Not so long ago I had the opportunity to go out there with the minister and look at those facilities.

Paul Edbrooke: What did you reckon?

Chris COUZENS: Incredible. Once they are set up, you cannot even tell that they are modular. It is a quick, efficient and cost-effective way of getting those facilities at our schools for that co-location of schools and childcare centres and kindergartens that are really important to people. When parents are running from one end of town to the other to drop off the kids at kinder, drop off the kids at school, they are really excited about the opportunity to be able to do that one drop-off, so that is really important for people in my community. Rendine Constructions, who are building the modular kinder units, are a longstanding company in Geelong, but they are employing more and more people to meet the demand that we are putting on them to build these modular units. Again, it has created jobs in my community along with many other benefits right across Victorian communities, so that is really exciting.

This is an ambitious reform. Recently we passed a bill to enable the minister to acquire land to deliver kindergartens and the 50 government owned and operated early learning centres. The first four centres will open in 2025, with a further 26 locations announced. The remaining 20 early learning centre locations will be selected based on need. All centres will be opened by 2028. Under our government we have also made kinder free, which is really exciting, and many in my community do not stop talking about this opportunity, because the cost of sending kids to kinder is quite difficult for many, many families, particularly in our environment now. By having that free kinder they are saving something like \$2500 in fees each year to send their children to kinder, which is fantastic. It also provides much-needed relief for family budgets and gives more women a choice to return to the workforce, which is another aspect of this that has been really exciting for communities. I commend the bill to the house.

Dylan WIGHT (Tarneit) (18:19): It gives me great pleasure to rise this evening to make a contribution on the Early Childhood Legislation Amendment (Premises Approval in Principle) Bill 2023. I think it is imperative that from the outset we make it clear that this bill is all about delivering on the Allan Labor government's commitment to Best Start, Best Life – fully funded three- and four-year-old kinder – because we know over this side of the house how incredibly important it is to have a strong, a funded and a great start to your early education. We on this side of the house know that that should be free so every single child in Victoria, irrespective of where they live, irrespective of how much money their parents make, have access to a fantastic education at the beginning of their life. I will come back to those reforms as part of this contribution a little bit later.

The goal of this bill is to introduce a recommendation which came through the education ministers meeting in the 2019 national quality framework review. In that meeting it was decided to establish a premises approval in principle scheme for new early childhood services in multistorey buildings. My electorate of Tarneit over the last 10 to 15 years has obviously seen tremendous growth – growth in terms of population, growth in terms of infrastructure needs, but growth in terms of educational needs as well, because we know that the more people that are living somewhere, the more babies that are being born and the more children that are there, the more additional services that we are going to need in early childhood for our youngest kids. The approval in principle will simplify the process for upgrading and building multistorey early childhood services while ensuring that safety is a top priority for these projects. Indeed I would look at it as a very innovative way to increase the amount of child care and early learning that we can have out in our outer suburbs when we are looking at new developments.

To enact this recommendation, the bill will amend the Education and Care Services National Law to establish a premises approval in principle process, which will allow developers, builders and early childhood service providers to apply to the regulatory authority for approval in principle of a proposed early childhood service premises if the service premises is to be located in a new or altered multistorey building, and we are defining a multistorey building in respect of this legislation as three or more storeys, including the ground level.

I think I have heard, in several contributions on this bill today, conversation and talk about not just planning when it comes to this state but planning when it comes to early education as well. We know, particularly in the outer suburbs, that we cannot just continue to build out; we must be innovative in

the way that we plan. Part of that is that we must be innovative in the way that we plan our educational infrastructure and the infrastructure that our growing suburbs need. I think this bill plays an incredibly important role in that. It cuts the red tape and makes it easier in multistorey buildings to have educational services close to people's homes, close to people's jobs and close to the amenities that our young kids and their families need. Whilst less than 1 per cent of approved early childhood services are located in multistorey buildings, the number of proposals for early childhood services in multistorey buildings is expected to increase over time, because as I said, the blank edges of the map in Victoria are being filled in. We cannot just continue to plan outwards; we have to be far more innovative in the way that we do this. We expect, quite rightly, in our suburbs, in our growing suburbs, and in our regions indeed that we will have more innovative solutions like this. So we need to make it as easy as we possibly can for developers, for communities and for providers to provide these essential services to our Victorian families.

By providing approval in principle, the changes ensure that applicants will have assurance that their proposed premises design is adequate to meet the physical premises requirements in the regulatory scheme, as I said, cutting red tape for communities and for providers that are trying to do the right thing in providing services to our youngest Victorians. This will enable changes, when required, to designs and building plans to ensure the completed premises and buildings meet the regulatory requirements of the national framework, which, as we spoke about earlier, were born out of that meeting of the education ministers in 2019, including those aimed at protecting the safety of young children in emergency evacuations or ensuring adequate supervision in a service.

I started my contribution by talking about how imperative these changes as part of this bill are to the Allan Labor government delivering on our commitment in 2022 to Best Start, Best Life. A major focus of this government has been on providing the best start to life for our youngest Victorians so that they can have every possible chance to thrive. That means every single Victorian child, irrespective of where they live, irrespective of who their parents are, will have two years of kinder, three- and four-year-old, absolutely free of charge. I think back to my days of having two children in kinder, and by God I wish that we had had Best Start, Best Life then, four or five years ago.

This bill, as I said, will help support our Best Start, Best Life program by improving the early childhood service approval process for services in new or altered multistorey buildings and support the delivery of the infrastructure that is necessary to facilitate that. In my time as the member for Tarneit, which is coming up to 12 months now, I have had the absolute joy of attending several early childhood education centres that are providing for our thriving and growing community. Having had the opportunity to visit so many of these wonderful facilities, I have seen firsthand how our government's Best Start, Best Life program has helped parents, has helped kids and has helped service providers but has also helped create and foster, and will continue to do so, thriving communities out in our suburbs like Tarneit and Hoppers Crossing, because every single kid, irrespective of where they live – and I will keep repeating it – deserves the best start to their education early in life.

Victoria leads the nation on early childhood education and care, and we have committed \$14 billion to expanding kindergarten programs across the state under our Best Start, Best Life reforms. As part of this we have established the 50 new government owned and operated early learning centres initiative, which is an ambitious plan to address childcare shortages in areas of greatest need. Where possible the early learning centres will be co-located with schools to avoid the double drop-off, and I can tell you the double drop-off in a growing place like Tarneit can be an absolute nightmare in the morning and afternoon.

This is an ambitious reform. Recently we passed a bill to enable the minister to acquire land to deliver kindergartens and the 50 government owned and operated early learning centres that I just mentioned. This is a fantastic bill for Victoria, it is a fantastic bill for families and it is a fantastic bill for young students. I commend it to the house.

Anthony CIANFLONE (Pascoe Vale) (18:29): It is always a pleasure to follow the member for Tarnait. What an amazing contribution. I rise to also speak in support of the Early Childhood Legislation Amendment (Premises Approval in Principle) Bill 2023. In my first speech to Parliament I spoke about the ongoing commitment of the Victorian Labor government and my commitment as the new local member for Pascoe Vale, Coburg and Brunswick West to continuing to lift and improve access and outcomes for local children through early childhood education. As the local member but also as a local parent I appreciate firsthand just how much local families value the quality of our local early education and kindergarten resources, as it is local kinders that first shape and inspire the minds and future life chances for those we value and care for the most: children and young people. With 90 per cent of a child's brain developing before the age of five, early childhood education has a profound effect on the way children develop and lays the foundations for their future life chances. That is why I am so proud to be part of the Allan Labor government, whose very first priority and task was to assemble a refreshed whole-of-government approach to supporting children and families through the creation of a new Minister for Children portfolio, held by the predecessor of the member for Pascoe Vale, Minister Blandthorn in the other place. This refreshed approach places children's wellbeing, welfare and future life chances at the very heart of government decision-making and seeks to bring together the Victorian government's nation-leading investments and reforms under a central coordinating portfolio, which since 2014 has included commitments to investing over \$14 billion to expand kindergarten programs across the state under Best Start, Best Life reforms; establishing 50 government owned and operated early learning centres to address childcare shortages in areas of need; and where possible seeking to co-locate new early learning centres with schools to avoid the dreaded double drop-off through reforms which were enabled through legislation passed last sitting week.

The rollout of the game-changing \$270 million free kinder initiative is another key reform we have introduced that is available to all three- and four-year-olds participating in funded kinder programs. It is a groundbreaking initiative which is providing a 15-hour-per-week program for four-year-old children and a minimum 5-hour-a-week program for three-year-old children too. Free kinder is also saving families up to \$2500 per year, playing a big role in alleviating the cost-of-living pressures for families and also acting as a women's economic reform initiative, particularly for young mums, by encouraging women to re-enter the workforce through the increased provision of early childhood education. We are also progressing with the establishment of pre-prep over the next decade, which is another key reform, which will lead to a new universal 30-hour-a-week program of play-based learning being made available for four-year-old children. We are also delivering record investments to upgrade local early childhood centres and kindergartens across my community in Merri-bek, which I will touch on shortly, which will also continue providing the growing number of local young families in my community with greater access to local kinders. These are all vitally important initiatives, which will all help to play a role in setting the foundations for better health and a better life for our young children. But there is always more to do, hence why we are now seeking to progress with this Early Childhood Legislation Amendment (Premises Approval in Principle) Bill 2023.

In its last term the government enacted the Early Childhood Legislation Amendment Act 2022 to implement most of the findings and recommendations of the 2019 national quality framework review, which was approved by all states and territories and the Commonwealth through the education ministers meeting. The NQF introduced the new quality standards in 2012 to improve education and care across long day care, family day care, preschool, kinder and outside school hours care services.

Key standards are outlined in the NQF that recognise early learning centres need to be adhered to across seven key pillars. Quality area 1 relates to educational programming by educators around child-centred learning support for their development. Quality area 2 covers children's health and safety and ensures the right of children to learn in a safe environment that promotes their health and wellbeing; it looks at things like appropriate areas for sleeping for young kids and accessibility, disability and sensory needs. Quality area 3 goes to children's physical learning environment to ensure that there is a safe and suitable environment provided that makes appropriate provision for sufficient indoor and outdoor learning spaces that promote play-based learning and inclusivity and respond to sensory

needs. Quality area 4 covers staffing arrangement requirements across centres. Quality area 5 facilitates respectful and responsive relationships between staff and children. Quality area 6 seeks to strengthen collaborative partnerships with families and communities. And finally, quality area 7 fosters effective governance and leadership across centres.

The 2019 NQF review identified various system-wide improvements to these NQF standards of 2012, with a specific area of focus on the challenges associated with the services located in multistorey buildings, particularly in relation to the safety and wellbeing of children attending those services. In addition to those recommendations to improve safety measures related to services located in multistorey buildings, the 2019 NQF review also identified an emerging issue in Victoria and the ACT in relation to newly built or renovated early childhood services premises in multistorey buildings which are completed consistent with local building law and planning requirements but do not comply with the NQF requirements relating to the physical design and environment of education and care services premises. In these circumstances applicants for a service approval to operate an education and care service in newly built or renovated premises face the risk that their application will be refused unless costly post-construction rectification works are undertaken to make the service premises compliant with the NQF.

The 2019 NQF review recommended establishing a premises approval in principle scheme for newly built or renovated services premises in multistorey buildings in Victoria and the ACT to address this issue. That is what this bill is all about progressing and implementing. By providing approval in principle, these changes ensure that applicants will have assurance that their proposed premises designs are adequate to meet the physical premises requirements in the regulatory scheme, including those aimed at protecting the safety of young children in emergency evacuations, ensuring adequate supervision in services and ensuring appropriate outdoor and indoor learning space provision and ratios are provided for so children can learn in safe, nurturing and welcoming environments. Importantly, the changes proposed in this bill allow for changes to be made before the commencement of construction works, avoiding the time and cost of rectification works once the premises are completed. Only 10 per cent of approved early childhood services are located in multistorey buildings, but the number of proposals for early childhood services in multistorey buildings is expected to increase over time, including in inner-suburban areas such as mine in Merri-bek, which I will touch on very shortly.

As I mentioned earlier, these reforms continue to build on the Labor government's commitment to expanding and improving access for families across the state and across Pascoe Vale to good-quality early childhood and kinder facilities. On 22 August last year I was so pleased to join with the then Minister for Early Childhood and Pre-Prep Minister Stitt to announce that the Victorian Labor government would be investing a record \$10.7 million towards 11 new and expanded kindergartens across the Merri-bek community. As part of a new Building Blocks partnership with Merri-bek council, our government is investing to proudly create an additional 329 kinder places across the municipality by 2029 via just some of the following projects: a \$1.3 million investment to expand and upgrade the Doris Blackburn kinder in Pascoe Vale South – an extra 40 places; \$1.5 million to modernise the Derby Street Children's Centre in Pascoe Vale – an extra 22 places; \$500,000 to upgrade and refurbish the Turner Street kinder in Pascoe Vale to support an additional eight new places; and \$400,000 to expand the Pascoe Vale Community Centre upstairs from the Sussex Neighbourhood House, with works to facilitate an extra 40 places. In May I officially opened the upgraded and brand new St Linus kinder in Merlynston through a \$490,000 investment, and in May this year we announced the investment of \$154,000 into the Shirley Robertson Children's Centre in Coburg to facilitate an upgrade. Notwithstanding these record local kinder investments, we must continue to do more. That is why this bill is so critical, because it will provide the government with an additional pathway forward to help identify and support the delivery of more kinder places through multistorey and mixed-type developments.

In that regard I would like to draw the house's attention to KOTA – the Kids on the Avenue kinder – in Coburg, which can play a very important role in helping us to cater for this future growth in demand for local early childhood learning facilities. I had the pleasure of visiting KOTA on Saturday 21 October to celebrate their 30th anniversary. First established in 1993, KOTA has been doing a magnificent job of educating thousands of local young children over the years and now is very much one of our most vibrant and beautiful kinder communities in Merri-bek. KOTA has been providing a safe, happy and supported environment that fosters each child's social and educational development. Their mission for three decades has been the essence of what the Victorian Labor government's Best Start, Best Life initiative is about.

At the heart of that work for 30 years has been centre manager Colleen O'Brien, who has been there since day one and who, along with all the educators, is so committed to supporting KOTA's precious three- and four-year-olds to aspire and succeed. Thank you for all that you do. I would also like to acknowledge and commend KOTA's co-chairs and parent volunteers Nik Cotterell and Sonya O'Mara, who along with all the other parent volunteers, including Caitlin Phillips, dedicate their precious time to make KOTA the happy and vibrant kinder that it is, all of whom worked so hard to put on that beautiful 30th anniversary. There was a Shetland pony, face painting, music and so much more that the community celebrated with. I am very pleased to have visited to see firsthand the future plans and ideas, and I look forward to advocating on behalf of KOTA, which is such a magnificent and wonderful community.

This is a fantastic bill that will continue building on our Best Start, Best Life reforms. Whether it is free kinder or whether it is investing in kinders across Merri-bek, we are here to take real action on early childhood education.

Nina TAYLOR (Albert Park) (18:39): I am very pleased to speak on this important bill, the Early Childhood Legislation Amendment (Premises Approval in Principle) Bill 2023. I know that it is a straightforward regulatory bill. In its essence it is introducing an approval in principle process for multistorey buildings. Applicants will gain assurance that their proposed premises design is adequate to meet the physical premises requirements in the regulatory scheme, avoiding the time and cost of rectification works. I think that is the clincher. It does not get to the essence of the whole process of our Best Start, Best Life reforms, which are massive across the state, but it is certainly going to take – if I can say, for want of a better word – one of the uglies out of the process of building or developing appropriate premises for children in our state. I should say that multistorey buildings, we do find them in the seat of Albert Park and adjacent to it because, being in the inner burbs, space is not so ample, so this is a reality not for all of the kinders, but certainly some of the early childhood centres that I have visited have been multistorey. This is a really important reform. It is a pragmatic reform, because retrofitting is no fun. Generally the cost element, I imagine, would be pretty uncomfortable, let alone the inconvenience of also having to make rectifications after the fact. With pragmatic change we can have a much better outcome in the long run, and it also lets people know exactly where they stand.

I do note – a little caveat here – the premises approval in principle scheme is proposed to be a voluntary application process in Victoria. It is not intended to be mandatory at commencement. Why? This is to assess the use of the new approval in principle process on a voluntary basis. Whilst the bill does not contain the ability to make the approval in principle scheme mandatory, the minister must consult with the minister responsible for administering the Building Act 1993 before making a ministerial order for this requirement. This ensures that the views of the building and construction sector are considered before a decision is made, so we can see the rationale behind that there.

Somebody else in the chamber mentioned the issue of, for instance, when you might have to evacuate children. I can imagine that that is not as easy as it sounds, and certainly that was the reflection. I remember many moons ago I was an au pair in Sweden, and I looked after a couple of little –

Members interjecting.

Nina TAYLOR: No, no. This was many moons ago. Anyway, there were the delightful little children who are now grown up. Now I have forgotten the point I was going to make with that. No, I remember. The point was in midwinter it would take half an hour to get them ready to go outside by the time you put all the layers of clothing on and kept them in good spirits as well. That is the only point I was going to make. I do not know where people were going. But anyway, I am keeping it on the straight and narrow. It would take quite a long time, and you could only have – get this – in midwinter in Sweden no more than 20 minutes outside. If you went longer than that, kids could start to get ill. I learned this very quickly. As an Aussie in Sweden I had no clue. I had to learn as I went along when I was doing it. Doesn't this say something about the importance of early childhood education? I was meant to teach the kids English, so there was an educational element to it other than the supportive element – taking them to and from playgroup and other things. Driving on ice as well – oh, my goodness – in a Volvo of course. The trick was, though –

Members interjecting.

Nina TAYLOR: No, I think it was navy. The trick was not to drive on ice. You might all know this, but I did not. Again, the Aussie had no clue; do not drive too fast or too slow.

A member: Have you driven on ice?

Nina TAYLOR: I have driven on ice, like ice on top of the road. Let me just be clear about that. That is part of life there; you have to get used to it. They have special tyres. They have their winter tyres so you can grip better, which we do not tend to do here. I know it sounds precarious, but it is not. Maybe I should wind that back. Anyway, the kids were safe. We were all safe. We were fine. We got to and from playgroup. It was all good, but anyway – memories. There was a point to me saying that, and the point was the amount of time it took to get children dressed and ready and safe to go outside. It is a very pragmatic element. Having said that, do you know that with their babies, if they have been for a walk and they are coming back into the house, so that there is not that sharp contrast between the cold outside and the warm inside, they will leave them in the pram all wrapped up for 15 minutes or so? It also conditions them to that contrasting weather, so it makes them resilient.

Anyway, I do not know why we went there. That was my fault. We are going to come back to the bill – that would be a really good idea – and I will just unwind what I have delivered for myself. What is really great is the early childhood education bill. What is really wonderful about the Best Start, Best Life program is all the changes that are well underway already. Some people say when is it starting. It is well underway. I remember I visited a number of the kindergartens where they have bilingual classes for kids, which is really fantastic – Spanish, French and other languages – Hebrew. It is really wonderful hearing a whole raft of languages, which is really a gift for children. It is a gift for our community. I think it also fosters that sense of unity and really respectful diversity in our state, and that underpins those elements as well.

Nature play – this is another wonderful element. I was looking online, and the requirements for early childhood services in our state and the quality requirements say:

Early childhood services are required to have indoor and outdoor spaces that are designed to engage children with quality experiences.

I certainly can attest to having seen, and I know a lot of parents have fed back to me as well, that this is obviously a change in the way that we perceive experiences for children, letting them actually experience nature and find the creativity from within – not necessarily having to have so much stimulus around them but rather letting them imagine, through nature, a different way of looking at the world. They also gain respect for the natural environment and our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage, so they get a better affinity with the country that we all love so well.

Accessibility requirements – this really underpins the Best Start, Best Life program as well, because when you think about it, not only is it increasing affordability in that very pragmatic cost-of-living sense across the state but also literally people of all abilities are able to attend early childhood education

and truly feel part of it and not feel isolated in that process. I am never going to live down the au pair thing; I can see that already. But anyway, coming back, accessibility really underpins the whole concept when it comes to our early childhood education reforms, because fairness is what our Victorian government is all about. Certainly, in fairness, everyone deserves to have the right to attend and have access to and be supported by, from the get-go, high-quality early childhood education in our great state. That is exactly what we are backing in. The reforms are already well underway. They are being rolled out, and you can see that here.

Just to round it off, we have very pragmatic reforms here to ensure that when multistorey premises are being invested in, those who are investing in those premises get a good, clear evaluation of it meeting the requirements from the outset, rather than having to wait until later in the process when it can become costly and counterproductive and perhaps slow down the whole process. There are other reforms in this bill, but we can see really good change in our state.

John MULLAHY (Glen Waverley) (18:49): I do not know how I can follow that or top that in any way, shape or form. It is a deep honour to rise to speak –

Danny Pearson: Were you also an au pair in Sweden? Do you drive a Volvo?

John MULLAHY: Well, I'll get to that, but no, I wasn't. I want it on the record that, no, I was not an au pair in Sweden. But I am very much looking forward to meeting with the member for Albert Park to discuss her time in Sweden looking after the kids of Swedish parents. We will do that after this session is over.

I do rise to speak in favour of the Early Childhood Legislation Amendment (Premises Approval in Principle) Bill 2023, and I want to pay tribute to Minister Blandthorn in the other place and everyone involved in bringing this important piece of legislation to this house. I do want to acknowledge the member for Albert Park. You have been an early childhood educator –

Nina Taylor: A teacher.

John MULLAHY: A teacher, sorry. But I acknowledge that and that experience that you bring to this house when giving contributions on bills such as these.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: Through the Chair.

John MULLAHY: Early childhood education is a policy area which I have a strong passion for as the father of a five-year-old daughter. I want to make sure that along with her peers and every single Victorian she is given the best opportunity to grow and learn. My daughter has been very fortunate over the last two years to experience the three-year-old and four-year-old kinder program. Obviously we are just starting to roll that out, and she experienced the 5 hours of three-year-old kinder last year and also is currently just finishing her last term of the four-year-old program, doing 15 hours a week, and I am looking forward to that being expanded out over the next decade. Just noting the experience my daughter has had of going through early childhood education, I have noticed the change in her academic prowess, her picking up of the alphabet and numbers and her picking up on the social aspects of emotions and things like that. You just notice on a week-by-week basis the changes in a child's development from this. We all know that 90 per cent of brain development is done before the age of five years old – and I want to wish a very happy birthday to my daughter for last week, when she turned five years of age – and that is why I am proud to be part of an Allan Labor government which invests in early childhood education, including our nation-leading free kinder policy. I will, however, return to that proud legacy in just a moment after I discuss the details of this bill.

In the 2019 review of the national quality framework, the framework regulating early childhood service provisions, quality and safety issues were detected in the design of multistorey early childhood service buildings. This bill seeks to directly address these concerns, and this bill will establish a process to obtain approval in principle for new early childhood service locations in multistorey buildings which are three storeys or more. It is important to note that the approval in principle will be in the planning

and design stage in both a construction and an alteration of a building, and this means more time and money will be saved in the potential occurrence of an NQF non-compliance and overall transparency and certainty for involved parties. The premises approval in principle scheme is accessible on a voluntary basis, as the government wishes to assess the suitability and sustainability of multistorey premises for early childhood service delivery. The bill does include the ability to make this scheme mandatory in future if required.

This bill also amends the Children's Services Act 1996 in order to ensure that the approval in principle process for multistorey premises is available for all early childhood services. Further, this amendment to the Children's Services Act guarantees the quality and safety of any early childhood services by subjecting them to the same scrutiny of regulatory enforcement mechanisms. It is also important to note that targeted consultation with key stakeholders took place in the drafting process of this bill. No stakeholders raised any concerns with the proposed approach. These stakeholders include the Property Council of Australia, the Urban Development Institute of Australia and the Master Builders Association of Victoria, and the Department of Transport and Planning and the Department of Justice and Community Safety were also consulted. The extent of such consultative engagement demonstrates the soundness of this bill. These are quite straightforward and simple yet necessary changes to ensure the safety and quality of our early childhood services.

To understand the specific requirements of this bill, the uniqueness of the multistorey building as an early childhood service delivery site must be acknowledged. One clear example is the added complexity of evacuations. Careful site management and planning is required as young children take longer to evacuate than adults. The national quality framework guidelines state that buildings must include direct access to emergency exits and external muster points as well as utilisable building evacuation infrastructure. They also require a clear and appropriate building evacuation procedure, fit for purpose, with child safety in mind. There have been instances in Victoria when new buildings have complied with local planning laws, including the aforementioned safety regulations, but not with the NQF. This results in delays and additional cost pressures as additional works are required. The approval in principle scheme has the benefit of being able to identify any necessary improvements to the design, safety or mechanisms of buildings to be used for early childhood service delivery. This saves time and money as well as reducing risk to everyone involved.

The changes in this bill are also just one part of a large and ambitious agenda this government has for the early childhood sector. We understand that for every dollar we invest into early childhood education, two dollars of value will be returned to the Victorian community. However, numbers in an economical sense do not do justice to the profound impact good education has on the state and our people. You cannot put a monetary figure on the everlasting changes to a child's life if they are given opportunities that they would not otherwise have had if it were not for the Allan Labor government's investment. When you give every child, regardless of socio-economic background, the opportunity to rise up and grasp their potential through a world-class early education system, you are making a lifelong investment in their life.

We believe in investing in the power of people, the power of potential and the power of education, and our Best Start, Best Life reforms do just that. Starting this year, families all across Victoria are benefiting from the savings of up to \$2500 per child per year, thanks to the free kinder program this government has introduced. Over the next decade we will be increasing the number of hours of free kinder to 15 hours per week for three-year-olds and 30 hours of universal pre-prep for four-year-olds. This will be saving families money, giving parents the freedom to return to work and contribute to our economy, and giving all children – the future of our state – a world-class start to their education. These reforms and changes will form a proud legacy of the Andrews–Allan Labor government that will be remembered.

Since being elected to represent the people of Glen Waverley last year, I have had the absolute pleasure of visiting many of the kindergartens in my area. I would like to acknowledge the work of early childhood educators, staff and parents for their incredible work at the Waverley Kidz Children's

Centre, Bambou Early Learning Centre, Syndal Preschool, Tally Ho Preschool, Barriburn Preschool, Burwood Heights kindergarten, Petit Early Learning Journey Forest Hill and many more. When I visit these kinders I am once again reminded of our once-in-a-generation reforms and the positive impact they will have on the next generation of Victorians. We lead the nation in our ubiquitous efforts of bold, positive reforms to make our education system better than it is today. We are the Education State for good reason. We are always striving to enshrine opportunities for all children and deliver the best results and outcomes whilst ensuring safety regulations are efficient and up to date. This bill does just that, addressing the design and safety concerns within the early childhood services premises. I commend the bill to the house.

Paul EDBROOKE (Frankston) (18:57): It is with great pride that I rise to speak on the Early Childhood Legislation Amendment (Premises Approval in Principle) Bill 2023. Of course as a former teacher I know that good policy and legislation in the education space do not just fall out of the sky. No-one got the pun? That is okay. These things need to be created by great consultation, and in that I would acknowledge –

A member interjected.

Paul EDBROOKE: Oh, someone finally got the pun – fantastic! I would like to acknowledge the work of the Minister for Education and the minister's office, but also keeping in mind that it was World Teachers Day last week –

Members interjecting.

Paul EDBROOKE: Whoa, jeez, that was loud! I think everyone on this side likes a teacher and likes to support a teacher. It was World Teachers Day, and we know that our educators, our teachers, are really the lifeblood of our schools. As many people on this side have said – and I have seen it firsthand as a parent but also as a teacher – the more prepared children are once they get to primary school, the better things are. The more diagnostics we have to capture things early, especially now with some of the symptoms and what we would call, I guess, learning difficulties evolving, the earlier that we can actually identify them, the earlier we can treat them. One very good example of that would be the spectrum. We now know that there are many more young girls and women who are affected by being on the spectrum. That affects their learning, how they learn and how we need to teach differently. With things like that, if they can be diagnosed a lot earlier, it means that those children's lives are going to be a lot easier. Their education will be unaffected. In the past it has been quite hard, not just on the children but on their families.

Of course we have heard about the 15 hours of kinder and we have heard about the billions of dollars invested, and I think we all know I can brag on about that forever. But this is about getting premises lined up so we can actually roll out that 15 hours of kinder for our kids. I certainly commend this bill to the house, and I thank everyone for speaking on it.

Business interrupted under sessional orders.

Adjournment

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: The question is:

That the house now adjourns.

Bass Strait fishing

Tim BULL (Gippsland East) (19:00): (411) My adjournment is to the Minister for Outdoor Recreation, who of course has responsibility for the commercial fishing sector. I probably could have made this to the Minister for Environment, but I will go with outdoor recreation. The action that I am seeking is the minister's support in relation to the decommissioning of the oil and gas fields in Bass Strait to have those areas returned to the commercial fishing sector.

What has transpired to date is that the multinational companies that are involved have spoken about cutting these platforms and underwater structures off 50 metres below the surface. That of course does not allow for our commercial fishing nets to go into those areas, so it leaves that area unfishable from a commercial perspective. What I am seeking from this government and the Minister for Outdoor Recreation, who as I said, has responsibility for this sector, is for them to work with their federal government counterparts to return this area to a commercial fishing ground as it was before the oil and gas industry commenced in Bass Strait. We need to be able to have grounds returned to this industry, because they are under additional pressures at the current time from potential wind farm development in the Bass Strait – and what transpires there we will find out probably over the next decade. But in relation to this issue, they were fishing grounds before the oil and gas industry went in, and they need to left as fishing grounds when the oil and gas industry departs. I would hope as a Parliament generally – there is more than one minister and shadow minister involved in this – we can work together to get the best possible outcome for those commercial fishers, because it is such an important industry not only for the East Gippsland economy but for the Victorian economy. It has the biggest throughput of seafood of any port in this state, and it is amongst the highest in Australia, so you can imagine the impact that has to our Victorian economy. We need to look after those commercial fishermen. I seek the full Parliament's support to achieve that, but I direct this adjournment to the Minister for Outdoor Recreation.

Western Port Bay

Jordan CRUGNALE (Bass) (19:02): (412) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Environment, and the action I seek is that the minister join me and my neighbouring government MP colleagues and meet representatives from the Western Port Biosphere Reserve Foundation, with a focus to discuss their vision and advocacy for a whole-of-bay approach by way of a strategic management plan and framework akin to the *Port Phillip Bay Environmental Management Plan 2017–2027*. Western Port Bay is a critical economic and environmental asset. It includes French Island and Phillip Island, the Yaringa Marine National Park and the Port of Hastings. It is the second-largest bay in Victoria, has the Ramsar wetlands and is Victoria's only UNESCO biosphere, one of four in Australia.

CEO Mel Barker and her team are doing remarkable work. They have effectively brought the community, agencies, councils, research institutions and industry stakeholders around the bay together and worked side by side and in partnership with the Bunurong Land Council, so much so that just in August we announced grants totalling \$1.2 million to be shared between them for planning and restoration projects all to help futureproof this unique coastal biodiversity as well as working towards optimising the blue carbon storage capacity the reserve provides through its extensive mangroves and wetlands. That same month they also held an All Things Western Port community forum hosted by Melbourne Water to connect community members and stakeholders to discuss the challenges and opportunities of this unique region and also to hear updates on research and progress on key environmental work.

So invested is our community I am going to mention a sliver of the community groups, organisations and agencies that have input into and support the development of a whole-of-bay approach. In my electorate this includes Moonlit Sanctuary in Pearcedale, the Phillip Island Conservation Society, Phillip Island Nature Parks, the Save Western Port Woodlands group, Western Port Catchment Landcare Network, Bass Coast Landcare Network and Western Port Seagrass Partnership. To name a few in the surrounds, they are Willum Warrain Aboriginal Association, Blue Wedges, Crib Point Stony Point Foreshore Committee of Management, French Island Community Association, Westernport and Peninsula Protection Council, Deakin Uni, La Trobe Uni, Dolphin Research Institute, Environment Victoria and the Victorian National Parks Association.

I want to take this opportunity to reiterate that my support for an overarching strategic plan continues. I also want to thank the over 250 community members that have written postcards and the local schools that have also done drawings of what they love about the area and what they want to see

protected. Thanks to the local community environmental organisations that I have met with, all calling for a coordinated whole-of-bay approach. Thank you, Minister. We so look forward to seeing you in this stunning, special, world-renowned Western Port UNESCO biosphere region.

Terang aged services

Roma BRITNELL (South-West Coast) (19:05): (413) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Health, and the action I seek is for the minister to instruct her department to investigate and identify options for expanding aged care accommodation services at Terang hospital. Following the recent closure of the May Noonan aged care facility, the Terang community is facing an aged care crisis. The May Noonan aged care facility was an important part of the local community, providing a place for residents to receive the care they needed close to home, and it was convenient for family and friends to visit and offer their support. With the closure of May Noonan by Lyndoch Living, many existing residents were relocated to Warrnambool, a 40-minute drive away along the unsafe and poorly maintained Princes Highway.

Terang residents looking to enter aged care can only do that through the existing aged care facility at the Terang hospital, as their local option, and this centre is already at capacity and very limited. The Terang community have formed a committee to look at what can be done to fill the very large gap left by Lyndoch's departure. Originally it was the locals who began this journey and saw the creation of the May Noonan Centre to become part of the town's aged care facilities and care for elderly community members. It is very disappointing for them to see that they have lost the facility they worked so hard to create and support.

Terang locals are now doing anything and everything they can to facilitate the ability of people to grow old in the community. Many have lived in this community their whole lives, surrounded by the friends and family that they love to see every day. The community tells me lovely stories of how the residents of May Noonan who could walk up the street to the shops each day would be stopped frequently and would catch up for a chat. Everybody knows everybody in small towns like Terang, and it is devastating that the community can no longer be part of this journey and support the elderly members of their community.

The local community are ready and willing to assist, and they need to be included and involved in the necessary planning and facilitation of a solution for Terang. I have met with the committee formed, who raised with me the proposal to expand the number of aged care beds at the Terang hospital, where they believe it will be easier to meet the requirements, with registered nurses on duty at all hours of the day. The committee are conducting the due diligence required so the project will be ready to fund, and I am committed to working with the minister and the government to deliver this in a bipartisan manner as quickly as possible.

It is the government's responsibility to support regional residents, and this can include providing funding and staff where the provision of aged care and hospital facilities intersects. This is particularly beneficial as it also addresses the severe underinvestment in our regional healthcare facilities that has occurred under Labor, which has shown across South-West Coast that it does not care about regional infrastructure, be it our roads, health, child care or public housing.

Bellarine electorate environmental groups

Alison MARCHANT (Bellarine) (19:08): (414) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Environment, and the action I seek is for the minister to meet with a number of recipients of the recent 2023 Victorian Landcare grants. In the Bellarine we have several incredible environmental and Landcare groups that have recently received these Victorian Landcare grants to help volunteers protect and restore our beautiful landscapes. Bellarine Landcare Group, Swan Bay Environment Association and Bellarine Catchment Network were successful in receiving project grants to support on-ground work and community engagement and education that protect and improve our natural environment. Friends of Begola Wetlands, Ocean Grove Coastcare, Clifton Springs Curlew Coastcare and Surf

Coast and Inland Plains Landcare network were recipients of Landcare support grants, which will help and assist with the associated costs for their community group. We also had St Aloysius Catholic Primary School, St Leonards Primary School, Surfside Primary School and Leopold Primary School as recipients of the 2023 Junior Landcare and Biodiversity grants, which provided funding for projects that involve and educate young people in valuing and caring for Victoria's biodiversity and natural environment. I am very proud of these groups, and others, and their volunteers that work extremely hard in the Bellarine community in dedicating their energies towards protecting and restoring our environment. I know they will greatly appreciate and welcome the minister's visit.

St Kilda Primary School

Sam HIBBINS (Pahran) (19:10): (415) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Education, and the action I seek is for the minister to come to the Prahran electorate and visit St Kilda Primary School to hear from students and the school community as to why they desperately need a community hub to be built at the school. I recently visited this wonderful local public school in the Prahran electorate, with its thriving, close-knit community and dedicated team of staff. It currently lacks an indoor space large enough for the whole school to congregate for assemblies, performances and community activities, and this really limits the school's ability to provide high-quality, inclusive physical education or wellbeing programs. This lack of appropriate quality indoor space is negatively impacting the school's students. Students are missing out on important PE classes. Students with disabilities cannot access the oval. Students are crammed into the limited indoor space the school has or have to travel to other schools for their special events. The graduation ceremony has been held in the pouring rain. Community groups who wish to use the school facilities have been turned away because there is no appropriate school space for them.

The school has developed a master plan for a multipurpose community hub which would allow for assemblies and PE in inclement weather and provide for excellent sporting and recreation facilities for the school and the wider community. This project would improve the opportunities for the school to come together for ceremonies and graduation programs, really expand those educational opportunities for students and provide for much-needed out-of-school-hours care facilities, but despite continuous efforts by the school to secure funding with the government, no progress has been made.

The community hub would also benefit the wider community, help address the shortage of indoor basketball and netball facilities in the local area within the City of Port Phillip, provide for exhibition and performance spaces and enable really important community partnerships to continue. Previously a sports hall was demolished in 2019, with an understanding that a community hub would be built to replace it, but unfortunately almost four years later there is no hub, and it is needed more than ever. So I really urge the minister to meet with the school community, get an understanding of just how critical this community hub is and then fund the construction in the upcoming state budget.

Hastings electorate schools

Paul MERCURIO (Hastings) (19:12): (416) I direct my adjournment debate to the Minister for Education, and the action I seek is for the minister to come down to my electorate of Hastings at the beginning of the new school term next year to attend a principals morning tea. I have had the pleasure of holding principals morning teas at my office in Somerville over the last couple of months. We have held three so far and have another two planned before the end of the year.

I invite five or six principals from a range of local government and non-government schools from around my electorate to talk about things that matter to them. We sit down over tea and coffee and homemade cake. So far I have made my Sicilian lemon cake, I have made my Tim Tam cheesecake and I have made my sticky date pudding, and I must say they literally all went down very well. I have been really pleased with how these meetings have gone. Usually the principals know of each other, but some have never actually met or ever had the chance to chat over a cuppa. It is a great opportunity for the principals to share some of their frustrations about the difficulties they have and the challenges they share whilst working so hard to do the very best for each and every one of their students. It is also

a great opportunity to share and talk about what is happening within their schools and within their communities. I have really enjoyed the opportunity to hear about each of their needs and to share the opportunity to talk about possible solutions. By far the best thing is seeing the principals connect with each other in a way they have not before and share insights and discoveries that others may not have considered. When they leave I know they will remain connected, and that is a great thing for them, their students and their communities. I look forward to the minister's visit, and if he would like to let me know what cake he would like me to bake on the day, I would be very happy to do so.

State Emergency Service Glen Eira unit

David SOUTHWICK (Caulfield) (19:14): (417) My adjournment tonight is to the Minister for Emergency Services, and the action that I seek is for the minister to do whatever is possible in terms of advocating for the surplus land at Katandra special school in Ormond to be allocated to our Glen Eira SES unit. Our Glen Eira SES unit, which is currently located in Bentleigh, is literally out of space. It is a fantastic unit. Danielle Eyssens, who is the unit controller, has been the unit controller there for five years and has done an amazing job growing these volunteers. I was there only last week, and the trucks do not even fit in the shed. They are unable to even clean the leaves off the roof because of occupational health and safety issues within the building. We all know what a fantastic job the SES does in our community. They are a great organisation made up of volunteers. You do not know until you really need them. When they are called out in the middle of the night for floods, for damage, for storms or for wind, they are there to help you, and we want to make sure that they have got a facility to grow into.

The Katandra special school was closed just before the last election. The site has been sitting idle now for a fair time, and I invite the Minister for Emergency Services to come down to visit Danielle Eyssens. Nathan Jones is the section leader. I met with him the other day as well. They are a great team. Come down, meet our Glen Eira SES, have a look at the plans in terms of what we would like to do, have a look at the Katandra land, which would be a perfect site for this, and let us get this done. Rather than having a site that is vacant, let us ensure that our SES have the land that they can grow into and continue to do the great work that they do.

Monbulk electorate schools

Daniela DE MARTINO (Monbulk) (19:16): (418) My adjournment matter is for the Deputy Premier and Minister for Education, and the action I seek is for the minister to visit Upwey High School and Upwey Primary School to learn about their priorities and to see firsthand our record investment in education across the Dandenong Ranges.

There is a reason why we call Victoria the Education State. In my community alone we are currently upgrading The Patch Primary School, St John the Baptist Primary School and Emerald Secondary College, with Monbulk College, Monbulk Primary and Upwey High School already completed. In just those six schools there is over \$97 million in major upgrades. There have also been capital injections in schools like Upwey Primary School, Calista Primary School, Ferny Creek Primary School and Upwey South Primary School, among many more. Yes, I have many, many schools. Since 2016 Upwey High School has seen funding in excess of \$38 million to be completely transformed. With a new basketball stadium, a brand new art, science and technology building and the refurbishment of the administration area it really is unrecognisable. Its neighbour, Upwey Primary School, received funding in the Inclusive Schools Fund to deliver an inclusive outdoor learning space which was just recently completed, and they are thrilled.

A good teacher can take a class under a tree, but students – like all of us – respond to their environments. As a former teacher I know that our students thrive when they have the best teachers delivering their classes in excellent facilities. I am proud to be part of a Labor government that is investing record amounts in those facilities right across this state of Victoria as we build 100 new schools by 2026. I thank the minister, and I look forward to his visit to both of these schools to meet with school leadership and students and tour these facilities.

Country Fire Authority Hazelwood North brigade

Martin CAMERON (Morwell) (19:18): (419) My adjournment matter this evening is for the Minister for Emergency Services in the other place, and the action I seek is regarding a new fire station for the Hazelwood North fire brigade. For 95 years the quiet achievers at Hazelwood North have been serving the community and battling well above their average. They have gone from being a region 10 rural brigade to a region 27 brigade in recognition of all the work they do and their activities in the Latrobe Valley in the mines.

For many years the Hazelwood North fire brigade has been promised a new station. They have been waiting so long that the land allocated to them by council is in danger of being reallocated if not put to use. To say their current facility is not fit for purpose would be an understatement. The building is a single roller door shed and a meeting room the brigade built themselves. There is no room for volunteers to park without obstructing access to the tanker and the ultralight appliances, and they are located on a dangerous stretch of road where the speed limit is 100 kilometres per hour. Critically, they do not have 24-hour access to the station via an appropriate road. Because of all these factors, the brigade is unable to hold open days, unable to train appropriately and unable to have a junior brigade. Most importantly, volunteers do not have access to the facility they deserve and one they need to continue to protect our community. Yet despite all this the brigade continues to do a power of work in the Latrobe Valley. Members have assisted with floods across the state. They have travelled overseas to support fire suppression efforts. They manage the statewide weather station and undertake numerous activities in the interests of educating the community.

In 2028 the Hazelwood North fire brigade will celebrate its 100th birthday – 100 years of protecting the community, 100 years of serving the community. It is my hope, and that of all the hardworking volunteers, that they can mark this amazing milestone by cutting the ribbon on the new fit-for-purpose station they richly deserve. Minister, will you commit to a new station for Hazelwood North fire brigade and provide a time line for the delivery?

Box Hill electorate bus services

Paul HAMER (Box Hill) (19:21): (420) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Public and Active Transport, and the action that I seek is for the minister to provide an update on how the Allan Labor government is working to ensure that residents in the Wattle Park area are serviced by accessible and well-connected public transport. Last month changes to several bus routes in the Box Hill South and Burwood areas of the Box Hill electorate took effect. These changes were the result of funding for local bus services that was announced as part of the 2022 Victorian budget. The key changes include the realignment of the smart bus 903 route along Elgar Road rather than Warrigal Road as well as the termination of route 281 at Box Hill station and the removal of route 768 to reduce duplication. I understand that these changes were made to recognise that Deakin University is a key destination for many people, including staff, students and visitors, from across the metropolitan area. As part of the changes, services will also be expanded on route 766 Box Hill to Burwood via Surrey Hills, and the route will operate across more hours on weekdays and Saturdays, with the frequency of Saturday services increased from every 40 minutes to every 30 minutes. Sunday services have also been introduced, and the existing route has been realigned to better connect with the new Union station.

I understand that the changes have been made to increase service levels across the region. For some residents, particularly those living or accessing facilities near Warrigal Road, the service changes now require a longer walk or a transfer from one service to another. I look forward to the minister's update on the work being done to ensure that all members of our community can continue to access high-quality and frequent public transport services.

Responses

Ros SPENCE (Kalkallo – Minister for Agriculture, Minister for Community Sport, Minister for Carers and Volunteers) (19:22): The member for Gippsland East raised a matter for the Minister for

Outdoor Recreation, and the action being sought was for the minister to provide support in relation to the decommissioning of the Bass Strait oil and gas fields to return these areas to the commercial fishing sector. The member for Bass raised a matter for the Minister for Environment, and the action being sought was for the minister to join the member and neighbouring government MPs and meet with representatives from the Western Port Biosphere Reserve Foundation to discuss their vision and advocacy for a whole-of-bay approach for a strategic management plan and framework. The member for South-West Coast raised a matter for the Minister for Health. The action being sought was for the minister to instruct her department to investigate and identify options to expand aged care services at the Terang hospital.

The member for Bellarine raised a matter for the Minister for Environment, and the action being sought was for the minister to meet with a number of recipients of the recent 2023 Victorian Landcare grants, which support on-ground work in her community to protect and restore the environment. The member for Prahran raised a matter for the Minister for Education, and the action being sought was for the minister to meet and discuss the needs of a community hub to support his students and the community. The member for Hastings raised a matter for the Deputy Premier and Minister for Education. The action being sought was for the minister to visit the member's electorate at the beginning of the next school term and attend a morning tea with local school principals to hear about their needs and possible solutions.

The member for Caulfield raised a matter for the Minister for Emergency Services. The action being sought was for the minister to visit with him and also to do whatever is possible to secure the surplus land at Katandra special school and transfer it to the SES unit in Glen Eira. The member for Monbulk raised a matter for the Deputy Premier and Minister for Education. The action being sought was for the minister to join the member and visit Upwey High School and Upwey Primary School to learn about their priorities and see firsthand the government's record investments in education in the Dandenong Ranges. The member for Morwell raised a matter for the Minister for Emergency Services. The action being sought was for the minister to commit to a new fire station for Hazelwood North fire brigade and provide a time line for delivery. Finally, the member for Box Hill raised a matter for the Minister for Public and Active Transport. The action being sought was for the minister to provide an update on how the Allan Labor government is working to ensure residents in the Wattle Park area are serviced by accessible and well-connected public transport. I will ensure all of these matters are referred to the appropriate ministers.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: Thank you, Minister. Tune in for our next episode – same bat time, same bat channel. The house stands adjourned until tomorrow.

House adjourned 7:25 pm.