

# **PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE**

## **Inquiry into the 2024–25 Financial and Performance Outcomes**

Melbourne – Tuesday 25 November 2025

### **MEMBERS**

Sarah Connolly – Chair

Roma Britnell – Deputy Chair

Jade Benham

Michael Galea

Mathew Hilakari

Lauren Kathage

Aiv Puglielli

Meng Heang Tak

Richard Welch



**WITNESSES**

Jo de Morton, Secretary,

John Batho, Deputy Secretary, Digital and Government Services,

Lisa Gandolfo, Deputy Secretary, Consumer Affairs and Local Government,

Nicole Rich, Director, Consumer Affairs Victoria,

Dan Harper, Acting Executive Director, Local Government Victoria,

Jaklin Trajkovski, Executive Director, Regulation Policy, and

Dovid Clarke, Victorian Government Chief Information Security Officer, Department of Government Services.

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

On behalf of the Parliament the committee is conducting this Inquiry into the 2024–25 Financial and Performance Outcomes. Its aim is to gauge what the government, the courts and Parliament achieved in 2024–2025 compared to what they planned to achieve.

All evidence taken by this committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. However, comments repeated outside of this hearing may not be protected by this privilege.

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

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

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

I welcome the Secretary of the Department for Government Services Jo de Morton, as well as other officials who have joined us here today. Secretary, I invite you to make an opening statement or presentation of no more than 10 minutes, and this will be followed by questions from the committee. Your time starts now.

**Jo de MORTON:** Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon, committee. Firstly, I would like to acknowledge the Wurundjeri people as the traditional owners of the land we are on today, and I pay my respects to elders past and present.

We have made significant progress to deliver improved government services, and I really welcome the opportunity to share that with the committee today. To begin with, I thought I would provide a brief overview of our department.

**Visual presentation.**

**Jo de MORTON:** The department supports the portfolios of government services, consumer affairs and local government. Our purpose is to improve how Victorians and business engage with government and to accelerate digital transformation and corporate service reform across the Victorian public service. We do this through a focus on services to Victorians and services to government, as well as accelerating digital enablers like telecommunications and cybersecurity.

A better customer experience is at the heart of our work. We have been continuing to deliver more services through our Service Victoria platform, the front door to government services. There are now more than 200 services available, with 95 per cent customer satisfaction, and 'easy' is still the most common word used in verbatim customer feedback. Over the past year we have expanded digital drivers licences to include learner

and provisional drivers. We launched the online parents portal in April as a one-stop shop for parents and carers wanting to access resources on those important life moments and milestones in children's lives. Recognising the importance of supporting Victorians facing cost-of-living pressures, we have expanded the Savings Finder. There are now nearly 100 savings opportunities and concessions, and the tool is proving really popular with Victorians, with Savings Finder being accessed more than 2.6 million times since it was launched. You might have also seen or used the recently launched Servo Saver feature on the Service Victoria app. We launched this in October as part of the government's fair fuel plan, which is another important cost-of-living service for Victorians.

As we deliver more digital services we are seeing changes in how Victorians are choosing to do business with government. We have seen an increase in the uptake of digital services. There was a 43 per cent increase in activities in 2024–25. We are also seeing changes in how Victorians prefer to engage, with more people opting for digital. For example, the biggest place we have noticed this trend is in our contact centre, where online interactions through chat bots, web chat and email have increased by 83 per cent, while telephone contacts have dropped by a third. Another important outcome of greater digital uptake of services is that as we onboard more services onto the Service Victoria platform, the cost per activity is coming down. The cost per activity is now \$1.57, which is well below the \$4 target.

Alongside a better customer experience, we are also focused on making it easier to access services. To do this, we are improving connectivity for Victorians. The Connecting Victoria program is delivering 1300 mobile and broadband projects, and we are now more than two-thirds of the way through that delivery program. There were 318 mobile and 25 broadband projects delivered in 2024–25. We are also continuing to make public wi-fi free at 400 hotspots across Melbourne and six regional locations. We are making it easier to access online services through convenient and secure online identity verification – 1.2 million people verified their identity online through Service Victoria in the 2024–25 financial year. We are also making it easier for people to access their important identity documents, like birth certificates. Most identity certificates are processed within three days. Live webchat now makes it even easier for Victorians to get assistance if they need it. Finally, we continue to make it easier to access government data through the Victorian government's open data portal.

For our Victorian Public Service colleagues, we have been focused on making it easier to get things done in the public service, and this is through advice on the safe and responsible use of artificial intelligence and offering expert cyber incident response services. We have also developed a dedicated AI chat tool for public servants to use. It is essentially a safe and secure ChatGPT-styled platform for staff. We have completed the pilot, and that will roll out through this year.

For our shared services customers we are creating more online, like new online manager and employee hubs to find the resources and supports they need to be effective, and we will build on that with more digital services for staff. We are also working with Cenitex to make sure departments and agencies have access to modern IT to make their lives easier and more productive. For example, we have got a new modern desktop with the latest collaboration tools and operating systems. Cenitex has a multicloud offering to make sure we have got the right mix of secure hosting providers.

We also continue to grow our digital marketplace, listening to our industry partners to make it easier for suppliers to do business with government. We are looking to drive whole-of-government efficiencies through efficient accommodation management. In 2024–25 we accelerated the adoption of zero-emission vehicles via a new policy to mandate ZEV first.

Moving on to the consumer experience, housing is one of the biggest expenses for most people and continues to be a priority. Our Funda-rentals campaign rolled out so that renters understand their rights. Our renting taskforce continues to use a range of early interventions to protect Victorian renters, including proactive inspections, education and public awareness campaigns to prevent breaches from occurring in the first place. The taskforce also partnered with major real estate websites to block unlawful rental bidding on realestate.com.au and domain.com.au to ensure only a single fixed price is included on rental listings, guaranteeing transparent pricing on rental properties.

We are also supporting the delivery of stronger protections for Victorians building or renovating their homes with reforms to the domestic building contracts Act passed in Parliament this September. We are helping Victorians living in a retirement village to retire in comfort and peace of mind through new legislation passed in

Parliament in May. The Retirement Villages Amendment Bill will deliver a suite of reforms to help residents make informed choices about entering, living in and leaving the village of their choice.

Consumer Affairs Victoria also implemented the machete ban and monitored product safety, seizing thousands of unsafe products from Panda Mart, issuing a public warning that over 400 non-compliant products were found at MINISO and conducting a comprehensive check of more than 320 showbags at this year's Royal Melbourne Show. I did volunteer to check the safety of the Bertie Beetles, but they said that was not necessary this year.

Finally, our department had a key focus in the local government portfolio on stronger local governance. We supported councillor conduct reforms, such as new laws relating to mandatory training, a model code of conduct and stronger sanctions for misconduct. We supported the focus on gender equality, with 18 Women Leading Locally graduates elected to 15 councils. Continuing on this year, we will implement a new gender equality strategy with a mentoring program and a Mary Rogers Award to recognise women's contribution in local government.

We administered \$53.7 million of funding for public libraries and the Premiers' Reading Challenge. As you will see on this slide, that is a picture of Andrea Rowe. She is Victoria's first public libraries ambassador. Andrea is an award-winning author and was appointed to champion the importance of libraries in Victorian communities.

Finally, the department administered \$4.9 million in municipal emergency resourcing program grants to support councils with their emergency management responsibilities.

Chair, that is just a snapshot of some of the achievements and milestones of our new department's year of operations. Thanks for the opportunity to share this progress with you and committee members.

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

**Roma BRITNELL:** Thank you, officials, and thank you, Secretary. The government claims that the fuel app could save Victorian motorists up to \$333 a year at the pump. This data was derived from the ACCC in 2023 and relies on motorists filling up at the lowest price in the cycle. Does the department have an estimation of how much money this service will save Victorians, not just a hypothetical number that assumes the maximum possible savings?

**Jo de MORTON:** I think the savings are dependent on consumer behaviour and the choices that they make. So if people –

**Roma BRITNELL:** I recognised that in my question. I am just asking: have you done the actual figures on not just a hypothetical – have you got an estimate of what you think will be saved?

**Jo de MORTON:** Other than the \$333 per person?

**Lisa GANDOLFO:** We are relying on the \$333. That report was really useful, but it also gives Victorians clearer transparency about where to fill up for fuel in that it is a comprehensive –

**Roma BRITNELL:** So there has been no further work, though.

**Lisa GANDOLFO:** No.

**Roma BRITNELL:** Thank you. Currently the Servo Saver is only available by clicking through the Service Victoria app. Are there plans to make this service more inclusive and develop a webpage similar to what has been done in other fuel saver applications?

**Lisa GANDOLFO:** Sorry, is your question around whether it is –

**Roma BRITNELL:** Are there any plans to make it –

**Lisa GANDOLFO:** Not having to download the app and get it through a web browser?

**Roma BRITNELL:** Not having to click through, make it more user-friendly and develop a web page similar to what has been done with other fuel saver applications in other states.

**Lisa GANDOLFO:** We are taking customer feedback through the Service Victoria app. There are a range of enhancements that are potentially on the list of enhancements for our future through delivery through Service Victoria. So we are just listening to customers and if they think –

**Roma BRITNELL:** So you do have a list already? You just said you have got a list.

**Lisa GANDOLFO:** We are collecting ideas from consumers presently.

**Roma BRITNELL:** So there is no list or any plan at this point in time for upgrades.

**Lisa GANDOLFO:** Planned enhancements to the app? No, we still need to launch phase 2. Once that is launched, then we will look at planned enhancements.

**Roma BRITNELL:** Thank you. How much did the department spend on updating the Services Victoria app with the new Servo Saver feature?

**Lisa GANDOLFO:** The Victorian government allocated \$105.8 million to the whole Department of Government Services Service Victoria work program in the 2025–26 budget, but that provides 140 services to Victorians.

**Roma BRITNELL:** So how much was spent on the actual Service Victoria app for the fuel saver?

**Lisa GANDOLFO:** The only additional allocation was a \$300,000 Treasurer's advance, and that went towards a regulatory impact statement and engagement with our stakeholders. Otherwise –

**Roma BRITNELL:** Can you give me a figure of how much it cost to develop the fuel saver app? The whole \$105 million?

**Lisa GANDOLFO:** It was definitely not the whole \$105.8 million. I do not have a specific figure about how many exact resources.

**Roma BRITNELL:** Can you take that on notice, to tell us how much that cost?

**Jo de MORTON:** Service Victoria does not cost its services in that way. It builds up out of a range of reusable capabilities. For example, it will reuse an accounts module, it will reuse the mobile app. What proportion of any of those capabilities is spent on a particular line item is – they do not fractionalise the costs in that way.

**Roma BRITNELL:** So they cannot do that. No worries. Did the department pay any external third parties or consultants in relation to designing, developing or deploying the Servo Saver feature?

**Jo de MORTON:** No.

**Lisa GANDOLFO:** Except for the regulatory impact assessment, which is a specialist skill that we needed for the regulations and legislation. But apart from that –

**Roma BRITNELL:** So you did use a third party for that?

**Lisa GANDOLFO:** Only for the regulatory impact assessment, yes.

**Roma BRITNELL:** Can you give me a full breakdown of the costs of that and provide those to the committee on notice?

**Lisa GANDOLFO:** That will be provided by the Department of Government Services in the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee at the end of the 2025–26 financial year, but that –

**Roma BRITNELL:** So you cannot supply that to the committee?

**Lisa GANDOLFO:** Not today, because it –

**Richard WELCH:** Well, no. You know how much you have spent on it. You can let us know how much you have spent on it.

**Lisa GANDOLFO:** It was less than \$300,000, but I do not have the exact amount today.

**Roma BRITNELL:** That is okay. Can you take that on notice?

**Lisa GANDOLFO:** I can provide that.

**Roma BRITNELL:** Thank you. How many service stations had not already signed up to the service by the 31 July 2025 cut-off?

**Lisa GANDOLFO:** The number of service stations signed up is difficult to ascertain because there is mixed data about how many service stations there actually are in Victoria, including from fuel retailers themselves. However, the vast, vast, vast majority are now signed up to the Service Victoria app.

**Roma BRITNELL:** So how many are actually not signed up as of today then?

**Lisa GANDOLFO:** I could not tell you a headcount, because we do not know the denominator of how many fuel stations there are in Victoria and the stakeholders have not been able to provide that information either.

**Roma BRITNELL:** So you do not have a number of service stations that are signed up and you do not know how many are not signed up and still to do so?

**Jo de MORTON:** We know how many are signed up.

**Lisa GANDOLFO:** We know how many are signed up. The estimate is over 90 per cent.

**Roma BRITNELL:** So can we have those figures provided of how many have signed up?

**Lisa GANDOLFO:** Yes. We can provide them, any that are registered on the app.

**Nicole RICH:** We can tell you how many have signed up at the moment. Just because, Ms Britnell, Consumer Affairs Victoria is responsible for enforcement now. I can tell you that on Monday we had 1329 fuel retailers registered with Servo Saver. As my colleagues say, we cannot know whether that is the total in Victoria because there is no definitive list, but we are confident that we are continuing to monitor the market very vigorously and ensuring that retailers are very well aware of their obligations.

**Roma BRITNELL:** Thank you, Ms Rich. Can you tell me then: has the government taken any enforcement action against service stations that have not been compliant in signing up?

**Nicole RICH:** We are taking a range of compliance activities at the moment, like we do in all of the regulatory schemes that we administer. We have not taken any formal enforcement actions yet, but again, I can assure you that we are active in the market with our monitoring at the moment.

**Roma BRITNELL:** So zero – none?

**Nicole RICH:** Well, the scheme did not come into force in 2024–25, so there was not any –

**Roma BRITNELL:** Enforcement action at this –

**Nicole RICH:** So there was not any possibility for us to have taken any enforcement action in the last financial year.

**Roma BRITNELL:** So that is zero.

**Nicole RICH:** It did not exist.

**Michael GALEA:** Point of order –

**The CHAIR:** On a point of order, Mr Galea.

**Michael GALEA:** Could Ms Britnell please not misrepresent what the officials are saying. The answer was very clearly zero enforcement in 2024–25 because the scheme was not operating in 2024–25.

**The CHAIR:** I will remind the Deputy Chair, as I will remind all members that are here on this committee, not to put words into the mouths of witnesses who are giving evidence. I would also remind you, Ms Britnell, about the terms of reference and the year we are looking at. I think Ms Rich talked about how the year-to-date that we are examining looks very different to today's date that you are asking after.

**Roma BRITNELL:** Thank you, Chair. Are you confident that the locations are accurate for all the fuel stations around the state?

**Nicole RICH:** I can answer that. Well, for the retailers that are registered with us, yes, we are very confident that they are registered correctly and are telling us accurate details about where they are.

**Roma BRITNELL:** Can you provide the committee on notice with the dates of all these – sorry, did the government meet with New South Wales or any other jurisdiction to learn from various fuel applications that are already in –

**Lisa GANDOLFO:** Yes. That was part of our extensive consultation. The Department of Government Services did meet with officials in other states and territories.

**Roma BRITNELL:** Can you provide the committee on notice with the dates of all these meetings and an indication of who they were with?

**The CHAIR:** Deputy Chair, I am just going to interject there. I know this is your first time with the FPO, but the purpose of public hearings is for the committee to ask and afford witnesses the opportunity to respond to that here on the live stream. If you wanted to rephrase that question – it is a very different thing if the witnesses do not have the information and you want to take it on notice, as opposed to prefacing the question thinking they will take it on notice.

**Roma BRITNELL:** All right. I am comfortable with whichever way you would like to do that, but can you provide us with the dates of the meetings and an indication of who those meetings were with?

**Lisa GANDOLFO:** We can provide that on notice.

**Roma BRITNELL:** Thank you. Did the government investigate implementing any of these already-made solutions that were already in play around the country?

**Lisa GANDOLFO:** Yes. The Department of Government Services did look at all other solutions across other states and territories and looked at the solution that was best for Victoria.

**Roma BRITNELL:** So why did the government choose to develop its own version of an already-developed application?

**John BATHO:** I am happy to answer this one. Thanks, Deputy Chair. As the Secretary mentioned, the way that Service Victoria is built is as a set of modular, reusable technology capabilities, like the application form and the map display. So we have already got a lot of those capabilities which we can leverage, which means we do not need to provide large up-front investment to build new technology products, whereas if we had bought something that another jurisdiction had built or done something off-the-shelf, we would have been paying double or twice for the capabilities that we already had invested in as a jurisdiction. That is the model of Service Victoria: you invest once, build the capability, then reuse it for lots of different new products and services. That is where you are seeing, with the Service Victoria work plan, we are able to roll out a lot of new digital services without necessarily the large up-front capital investment that you might see in other IT projects.

**Roma BRITNELL:** Can you provide the analysis and the figures that back up the comments you are making now about that, please?



**John BATHO:** I am happy to provide the committee with more information about the Service Victoria model and the different –

**Richard WELCH:** No, the figures – the costs. You have said it would be much more expensive to develop versus that other option. Could we see that financial analysis, please?

**Roma BRITNELL:** Just the work that you did to analyse the difference when you went interstate and looked at how they did it, and why it would be more cost-saving to do it the way you chose – just the analysis and the cost savings that you anticipated as a result of that.

**Jo de MORTON:** We will have a look and see what we can provide. It is not quite the way you are asking the question, but there will be something that we will be able to –

**Richard WELCH:** If I may, you just gave us an elaborate answer about the analysis that you have done, and now you are saying you do not have the figures.

*Members interjecting.*

**Roma BRITNELL:** Point of order.

**The CHAIR:** Excuse me, there has been a point of order raised by the Deputy Chair. Deputy Chair, in the almost under 2 minutes you have got, what is your point of order?

**Roma BRITNELL:** I think I was just reprimanded for putting the answer, so I think the same could be afforded to us by the members at the table, please.

**The CHAIR:** I will on the point of order. I do not think there is a point of order. You have asked a question. Mr Batho and the Secretary are attempting to respond to your question and are being interrupted by Mr Welch. Do you want to ask your question again, Deputy Chair?

**Roma BRITNELL:** No, I will move on to the savings finder tool within the Service Victoria app. How much money has been spent on advertising to date for the savings finder tool?

**John BATHO:** I do not have that information.

**Jo de MORTON:** That was not something that was done by our department.

**Roma BRITNELL:** So this is not a tool that sits within Service Victoria?

**Jo de MORTON:** The tool sits within Service Victoria. We were not involved in the advertising campaign.

**Roma BRITNELL:** Okay. How does the department measure the effectiveness of that app?

**Jo de MORTON:** All of our digital products get measured on a range of measures. The main one is satisfaction. As people use it, we ask them to use our Thumbinator. We developed the Thumbinator because the Auditor-General had a view about a five-point scale and counting the third point as satisfied or not. It is really binary: were you happy or weren't you happy? Satisfaction is the primary one. The other ones are then utilisation and amount of interaction and activity on the platform and then a range of technical measures.

**Roma BRITNELL:** Okay. Now I am going to move on to births, deaths and marriages. Is the registering of births, deaths and marriages accepted as an important and fundamental role of the department?

**Jo de MORTON:** Yes.

**Roma BRITNELL:** And is the funding of the Victorian Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages provided on a sound and sustainable basis?

**Jo de MORTON:** That is work that we are doing right at the moment. I think you can see that. I think behind your question is getting to the Treasurer's advance for that funding.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Secretary. We are going to Mr Galea.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon, Secretary and officials. Thank you for joining us today. In fact I was lucky enough to be at the launch of *Dogs with Jobs* with Andrea Rowe at Frankston Library. It was fantastic day, especially because we had guide dogs there as well.

Secretary, I would like to ask you about an important area of public policy that your department is concerned with, and that is cost-of-living pressure and cost-of-living support for Victorians. Specifically, page 64 of the DGS annual report goes to some of the grant expenditure that your department has administered. Can you please talk to me about some of these programs and how they are helping, whether it is individuals or organisations, to provide meaningful cost of living relief?

**Lisa GANDOLFO:** In relation to page 64, I am just going to check: are you interested in the financial counselling, for example, the rental stress support package – those kinds of –

**Michael GALEA:** I actually am interested in rental stress support, but I was more interested right now in the financial counselling services.

**Lisa GANDOLFO:** Financial counselling – thank you. Thanks for the clarification. It was another challenging year for many Victorians with rising cost-of-living and housing pressures, as you have mentioned. We are investing to help and support services for Victorians experiencing financial hardship through investment in consumer and housing assistance, advocacy programs and financial counselling. Financial counselling significantly reduces emotional and financial stress and is a critical support for many people struggling with the rising cost of living and housing instability. Financial counsellors help people manage their debts and get their finances back under control, and they can help negotiate with creditors and insurers, work out payment plans and connect people to additional services to support them, including legal and mental health support.

I have got a bit of a list of what we funded. In 2024–25 we provided \$16 million in funding to community service organisations to deliver free, independent financial counselling services across the state, which supported 21,000 clients to get their finances back on track. When times get tough, it can exacerbate family violence and economic abuse, so we have also got specialist support available through our family violence financial counselling program. These specialist services received additional funding in the 2024–25 budget and supported another 3700 Victorians. Also, we have really noticed that rising cost-of-living pressures have put a demand on financial counselling in the system, so an additional \$15 million in funding over three years has been provided to meet this increased demand for financial counselling for people experiencing financial hardship due to mortgage and rental stress. The department managed the rollout of this new funding package, with 16 organisations across Victoria awarded grants to expand access to that important financial counselling service. The grants support tailored responses, including in health settings, for First Nations communities through our Aboriginal community controlled organisations, for primary producers and for small businesses. In addition, \$1 million over three years is being provided to fund additional worker supports and professional development for the new frontline workers in those 16 organisations. Through all those financial counselling programs, we can continue to deliver that critical face-to-face support.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you. You did actually just mention the rental support package, but pages 5 to 6 of the questionnaire say that \$4.1 million is provided to nine agencies to deliver targeted rental support through the rental support package. Can you talk to me about the process people need to go through to get access to this program and how it has been administered in the past financial year?

**Lisa GANDOLFO:** Thank you. I think the regulator assists with administering that program, so I might throw to Nicole for how.

**Nicole RICH:** For the process?

**Lisa GANDOLFO:** Yes. Thank you.

**Nicole RICH:** I am happy to answer that. Like with all of our grant programs, we follow the Victorian government's grant guidelines around how we advertise and administer that. We ran an open competitive grant process that was promoted to the community. We sought expressions of interest, knowing that there would be high demand. We then sought full applications from a long list of applicants. They were assessed according to the criteria of the program, and then recommendations were made on that basis and were approved from there.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you, Ms Rich. Secretary, if I can turn to retirement villages now, I understand that a lot of work has been done – according to the annual report – in the past 12 months in this space, specifically in response to a number of concerns that were raised by residents of these villages. What is the package of work that has been undertaken in the previous financial year?

**Jo de MORTON:** Thanks. In May of that previous financial year, the Retirement Villages Amendment Bill was passed, and there was a significant review of the retirement villages legislation. The amended Act will help people make informed decisions about where they want to live through a range of amendments around making sure residents can understand key terms, before they sign, through new standard form contracts; help prospective residents know what to expect before they commit by streamlining the information retirement village operators have to give them up-front; help residents understand the total financial implications of leaving a village, by regulating those deferred management fees, which we heard could be quite difficult for people to understand the financial impacts of; make exiting a village faster and fairer by requiring the operators to pay exit entitlements within 12 months; and strengthen Consumer Affairs Victoria's ability to monitor compliance and take enforcement action when needed, helping make sure that operators meet their obligations. The amended Act will also lift the professional standards of operators and strengthen the dispute resolution processes.

Now we are in the process of developing new regulations to align with the commencement of the Act on 1 May 2026. The regulations will help make sure residents get clearer, simpler information about what they are signing up for; help residents understand the true cost of living in a retirement village by improving the transparency around fees, charges and exit costs; and speed up and simplify the exit process so families are not left waiting long periods for the money that is owed to them. Like the Act, the regulations will be informed by close consultation with key retirement village stakeholders, and the regulations will also be subject to a regulatory impact assessment and undergo public consultation early next year. We are also working closely with the commissioner for retirement villages Heather Holst, who is assisting with the sector engagement and consultation.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you. In my electorate in particular, in the south-east, in the growing areas there is a large increase in the number of residential parks, estates and villages that have been growing up as well. As that sort of stepping stone, I guess, between normal residential accommodation and retirement villages, what work has been done to cater for this growing market and ensure that it is being well regulated as well?

**Jo de MORTON:** Yes. Thanks. The changes to the *Residential Tenancies Act* will make sure residents have the information they need so that they can make better, more informed decisions and get fairer agreements and clarity. They are things like making it easier to understand the residential park site agreements with standard contracts, making sure they get key information up-front by strengthening that pre-contract disclosure requirement and helping residents better understand how their rent payments might change over time, so they have got that transparency about the methods for calculating rent increases, which is really, really important. We are working with industry and other stakeholders on implementing those reforms. The key changes, like the standard form contract, are due to commence in mid-2026. That gives industry operators time to update their practices. Then there is the residential parks project, which was a review focused on residents' experiences of the industry that the commissioner for residential tenancies and the Consumer Policy Research Centre conducted, recognising that Victorians living in residential parks deserve a home that is safe and livable and comfortable. Government is considering the 12 headline recommendations of that project so further enhancements can come.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you. On to marketplace compliance now, and you did mention in your presentation the south-east's most notorious retailer, connected with pandas. Can you talk to me about how you have been utilising the funding? I know in this period that we are looking at there was quite a lot of enforcement action with that particular business, can you talk to me more broadly about how that funding is being used and, in particular, any trends or shifts in patterns that you are seeing and how you are responding to that?

**Jo de MORTON:** Yes, indeed. Our regulator Nicole is here, so I will give that one to you, Nicole.

**Nicole RICH:** Thanks for your interest, Mr Galea. Yes, I know you were very interested in the Panda Mart incident, which was very concerning for us and for all Victorians. I think we are very conscious that in the

current situation with cost-of-living challenges people are, rightly, looking for bargains. It is completely understandable. But in no way should looking for a bargain mean that you are buying unsafe and shoddy products at the same time. We think it is a really critical priority that we continue to maintain a high focus on ensuring product safety, so it was a very strong element of our compliance program through the 2024–25 year. We inspected over 900 stores – we inspected 914 different retail stores across Victoria during the year – and we have got a range of powers, so we can actually search stores. We can seize products that we believe are not compliant with Australian consumer law bans, safety standards or information standards. We can also issue public warnings, like we did in the instance of Panda Mart, and of course we can take further action if we need to as well. Without saying too much, I can say that our work on Panda Mart is currently ongoing; it was a really serious incident. We did issue a range of other enforcement actions during the year – 16 different infringements, 169 official warnings in the product safety space and nearly 50 voluntary undertakings, which is another power we have in this space, where we are not about enforcement actions just for the sake of it. Our clear priority is rectification and removing dangerous goods from sale. If the breaches are serious, we will obviously take further action, but if we can secure rectification immediately with the trader's cooperation, then that is the first option that we will choose to go through. So it has been a busy year for us.

As well as the Panda Mart activity we worked with the Melbourne Royal Show, like we do every year. We inspected the show bags last year. We had a really concerning incident when we were inspecting the show – which we do every year; we go on several occasions to look at the stalls. We did need to seize several hundred goods from a stallholder during the 2024–25 year, which again was disappointing. But the show was very good at working with us to ensure that that was immediately addressed, and we continued to work with them again this year.

Probably just one more thing in the product safety space, more generally – if we talk about renting later, we might talk about this – is I am very pleased that next week there will be a change to the law to have a new mandatory minimum standard for rental properties that blind and curtain cords need to be safe. They need to be tensioned so that they cannot form loops, which pose a really dangerous strangulation risk for young children. I know that occurs in the current financial year, but during the 2024–25 year we sent out nearly 5000 free curtain and blind cord safety kits to families across Victoria. We are continuing to make them available. We are encouraging landlords to use them as well. Our key priority is to just get them into homes and get the homes safe.

**Michael GALEA:** Terrific. Thank you. If I did have time, I would ask you more about that, but I do not think I do. If I can, just quickly then, on the rectification, from the efforts that you put in, are you seeing any shift in responses from those businesses that you do intervene with at the early stage to try and get a better outcome, rather than going down the enforcement path?

**Nicole RICH:** Yes. Obviously a lot of the retailers are also reliant on wholesalers and suppliers. So we do see a lot of businesses, as I said, are really mortified and want to engage with us. But yes, it is an ongoing issue.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** We are going to go to Ms Benham.

**Jade BENHAM:** Thank you, Chair. I just want some clarity. Earlier you said that Service Victoria does not manage an ad account for Meta, correct?

**Jo de MORTON:** No. I think that might have been DPC this morning.

**Jade BENHAM:** No, we asked you in the last session about how much was being spent to promote the fuel saver app – the Servo Saver app – and you could not give us an answer.

**Jo de MORTON:** I thought you were talking about the television campaign. Oh, on Servo Saver.

**Jade BENHAM:** Yes. How much do you –

**Jo de MORTON:** I thought you said 'savings finder'. Sorry.

**Jade BENHAM:** What is the cost that is spent to advertise the Service Victoria on digital?

**Jo de MORTON:** Pardon me. I thought you were talking about the savings finder television advertising campaign. What we do have is that our communications area will have social media accounts and they will put posts on there. We will have to take on notice how they pay. Is it generically for their account, or is it a particular post?

**Jade BENHAM:** I would like a breakdown of how much has been spent on a campaign to advertise Servo Saver and to advertise the savings finder tool as well.

**Jo de MORTON:** Yes, I can give you that for what our department has spent.

**Jade BENHAM:** Great. Thank you. Also, Service Victoria was supposed to remove the duplication across government, yet major services are still running in parallel. For example, the digital drivers licence is delivered by both Service Victoria and VicRoads. So can you provide the committee with a full list of all the other services that are duplicated between Service Victoria and other agencies in 2024–25?

**Jo de MORTON:** Yes. Are there any others?

**John BATHO:** No, I think that is the only one that I am aware of, which has one product across two channels.

**Jo de MORTON:** Two channels, being the joint venture arrangement, which is a bit unique. We can double-check, but as far as we know that is the only one.

**Jade BENHAM:** Okay, great. Thank you. What was the total cost in 2024–25 to taxpayers of maintaining both parallel systems, including the staffing, IT platform, maintenance and contract costs?

**Jo de MORTON:** Again, we would have the Service Victoria cost but not itemised by the drivers licence, because that is not how they deliver the product. They will have a cost of creating the mobile wallet for all the licences in there. They will have a cost of creating accounts for all the account holders. They will have a cost for payments – you know, whatever else. They do their work by reusable capability, not by service line like that.

**Jade BENHAM:** Okay. Earlier, also, Mr Batho, you stated that the app was developed using a modular system and that was much cheaper than using an app built from scratch. Given that answer, you would obviously have the comparison figures for that between from scratch and from a modular system. Do you have those?

**John BATHO:** Yes. Do you want to go?

**Jade BENHAM:** That would provide more clarity on that question.

**Jo de MORTON:** Thanks for the extra time to talk about it. I think where we were trying to go was that the cost of anything starts with: what is the right solution? So the first thing they do is the technology assessment about how to provide it.

**Jade BENHAM:** I am just looking at the comparison costs.

**Jo de MORTON:** But then what they say is, ‘Well, we need an API,’ and there will be an API, right? But then if you try to take a purpose-built app, then someone has to maintain that ongoing. You need a squad of people.

**Jade BENHAM:** I understand that, but obviously given the road that you have gone down using the modular level – I am after the figures: how much it would have cost in one scenario and how much it has cost in the current scenario.

**Jo de MORTON:** Yes. We would not have done those costings because –

**Jade BENHAM:** Then how do you know?

**Jo de MORTON:** because technologically that is not the way to deliver that service, because we would not have been able to support it in that way.

**Jade BENHAM:** That was not the answer that was given, but I am going to move on. Why have the agencies not retired their duplicative systems? Because there is more than VicRoads; there are also fines, ambulance membership, vehicle registration, which is obviously part of VicRoads. So why have the other agencies not retired theirs?

**Jo de MORTON:** Fines are not on Service Victoria or DGS. It is a link across to the fines system. Ambulance Victoria – that is one, actually, yes. We have already said we will take on notice and double-check if there are any others.

**Jade BENHAM:** Okay. All right. What are the main transactions that Service NSW offers but Service Victoria does not, and what are the reasons that Service Victoria is not offering those?

**Jo de MORTON:** Usually they are because of differences in government program delivery. Some of the really popular ones in New South Wales were like a cashback on new car rego, for example. Victoria does not offer that, so therefore obviously we do not have it.

**Jade BENHAM:** Why doesn't Service Victoria have a phone number?

**Jo de MORTON:** We have got the whole-of-government contact centre, 132 VIC.

**Jade BENHAM:** Why isn't it listed on the app?

**Jo de MORTON:** I think there is a 'Contact us' point.

**Jade BENHAM:** No. Just looked just then. There is no 'Contact us'. It is literally Instagram or Twitter. There is no phone number listed on Service Victoria at all.

**Jo de MORTON:** All right, we will have a look. Normally the way that we provide digital assistance is when people are in the middle of a task and they need help with it, and so what it will do is point you to the pathways to get that help, whether you want to use a webchat or a web form or a phone number. It is usually in transaction.

**Jade BENHAM:** Is it a real person at the end of that?

**Jo de MORTON:** Yes.

**Jade BENHAM:** It is not AI, not a chatbot?

**Jo de MORTON:** You have got a choice. You can use a chatbot if you want to, but if you do not want to, then there are our call centre people, who are based at Ballarat.

**Jade BENHAM:** Wouldn't a 'Contact us by number' be great? Some of us still like talking to people.

**Jo de MORTON:** Yes, I think we try and put it where people need the help rather than a generic one just to manage the direction of where to go to the right place and make sure if it is the contact centre or somewhere else –

**Jade BENHAM:** Okay, I am going to move on to illicit tobacco. This is for, obviously, consumer affairs. How is the new tobacco licensing scheme coming along, and when can we expect to see a reduction in tobacco shops being torched?

**Nicole RICH:** Sorry, Ms Benham, we are not responsible for the tobacco licensing scheme. It is a department of justice function, I believe, but it is not our function.

**Jade BENHAM:** Okay. So you are not in charge of the 14 inspectors that are about to –

**Nicole RICH:** We have no role whatsoever in relation to that scheme.

**Jade BENHAM:** So that is not consumer affairs?

**Nicole RICH:** No.

**Jade BENHAM:** Interesting. Okay. I am going to then move on. What about underquoting by real estate agents? That comes under consumer affairs.

**Nicole RICH:** Yes. I cannot deny that is absolutely our responsibility, Ms Benham.

**Jade BENHAM:** Right. Excellent. Thank you. The Victorian government earlier this month changed the rules for real estate agents doing a comparative quote. Now they have got to show proof of the comparison and how they came to that price. That is an analysis we would all like to see, isn't it? Is this admitting that the Victorian government legislation changes in this industry are simply not working?

**Nicole RICH:** The Director of Consumer Affairs Victoria – that is me – issued the new guidelines. I think it is fair to say that we formed a view as the regulator that the update was needed to be fair. That said, I do believe that the underquoting taskforce – look, we have work to do, there is no doubt about that. It is going to take time to completely stamp out this practice. But I do believe that the taskforce is effectively cracking down on the practice. But as I said, there is more to do and there are more changes that potentially need to be made to protect Victorians, and one of those in my view – I formed the view that we did need to update those guidelines. We had seen through the taskforce's experience on-the-ground examples where we were very concerned that agents had chosen three comparable properties in accordance with the strict, bald legislative definition of what a comparable property is, but we felt that there were more comparable properties that would have been available to inform the decision. So we have made the guidelines stricter to give very clear guidance about how you choose the three most comparable properties.

**Jade BENHAM:** Okay. Earlier in the presentation machete bins and the machete ban program were also brought up. Was there a KPI or a number set of edged weapons that you expect to collect in those bins?

**Jo de MORTON:** The bins are not ours, but definitely the interim ban on machetes was ours. What Nicole's inspectors did was they went around and looked at all the places that sell machetes and made sure that they had removed them from sale, as well as liaised with all of the online traders to make sure that there were no ads for products.

**Jade BENHAM:** Including Queensland?

**Jo de MORTON:** Yes. I mean, that was tricky, right? If you can get them delivered to Victoria – well, then they cannot do that. Do you want to just talk a little bit about how you did that, Nicole?

**Jade BENHAM:** That is okay. That is fine. I have got another couple of questions, in the interests of time. Rental property providers in Victoria are selling properties at unprecedented rates due to the shift by the Victorian government from being fair and equitable to both sides of the rental agreement to favouring the renter only. Does the Victorian government want to see a reduction in rental providers during a cost-of-living crisis?

**Jo de MORTON:** I am not sure – that might be a question for the government rather than the department. If you want to –

**Jade BENHAM:** Has the department advised that the priority should be the renter rather than the rental provider?

**Jo de MORTON:** I think what the department does is look for the fairness in the rental agreements.

**Jade BENHAM:** Do you believe it is balanced?

**Jo de MORTON:** I think there has been a lot of work to get that balance better. There is –

**Jade BENHAM:** Do you think that has caused the housing crisis and the lack of long-term rental properties?

**The CHAIR:** Ms Benham.

**Jade BENHAM:** Thank you. It is a pretty simple question.

**The CHAIR:** Well, I am just going to remind you – and I know this was a problem in budget estimates – asking witnesses for their personal opinions about matters is not –

**Jade BENHAM:** Okay, I will move on.

**The CHAIR:** the purpose of the questions to be asked today.

**Jade BENHAM:** Back to births, deaths and marriages, why is the funding initiative of a part of \$26 million and \$24 million needed over this year and next year?

**Jo de MORTON:** The funding is for both births, deaths and marriages and workers screening. In both of those areas what we have been doing is trying to reform those services. Particularly in BDM, I think we talked a lot at the last hearing about improving those turnaround times and getting digitisation in there. One of the things that the Treasury officials are doing is really working with us on what that will do to the cost of the service. They are really interrogating how we are using it – back to our earlier conversation about all the reusable capabilities. So for example, if the whole-of-government call centre is able to answer the calls instead of separately to BDM, then we are leveraging all of that technology. They are really just making sure that we have properly costed, and that is continued work in progress.

**Jade BENHAM:** So how much of that funding then goes back to the Victorian registry?

**John BATHO:** Is your question in relation to the budget allocation – the \$25.9 million?

**Jade BENHAM:** Correct.

**John BATHO:** I have not got the exact split, but it is roughly 50 per cent BDM and the other 50 per cent is worker screening.

**Jade BENHAM:** If you have not got the exact amount, could you supply that?

**John BATHO:** Yes, that is not a problem.

**Jade BENHAM:** Yes? Okay. Terrific. Sticking with this theme, was the department consulted on a plan to give private investors access to parts of Victoria's births, deaths and marriages registry, such as the joint venture partnership?

**Jo de MORTON:** No.

**Jade BENHAM:** No? Okay. Does the department support exploring a joint venture partnership in relation to Victoria's births, deaths and marriages registry?

**Jo de MORTON:** I think government has ruled that out.

**Jade BENHAM:** So a joint venture partnership has been ruled out?

**Jo de MORTON:** That is my understanding.

**Jade BENHAM:** It is your understanding. Okay, thank you. It was reported in the media that in June 2024 the then Treasurer met private investors and gauged interest in running some of the registry services. Did the department have any role to play in that process?

**Jo de MORTON:** No.

**Jade BENHAM:** Okay. I will go to the last one. The recording of births, deaths and marriages would appear well suited to digital transformation. What digital innovations has the Victorian registry undertaken or planned to undertake to – saved by the bell.

**Jo de MORTON:** Oh, that was a good question.

**Jade BENHAM:** I know. That was a good question.



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

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Thank you so much, Chair, and thank you very much, Secretary and officials. I wanted to ask questions relating to local government and particularly the Fair Go Rates system, which is described on page 201 of the 2024–25 BP3. Can you give an overview of that rate capping system?

**Jo de MORTON:** Yes.

**Dan HARPER:** Are you happy for me to go? Thank you for that question. Community expectations mean that, particularly in a cost-of-living crisis, they expect local governments to exercise restraint. The rate cap is currently a central feature of our Victorian approach to ensuring that. The local government rate cap increase for 2025–26 is set by the Victorian government at 3 per cent, and this is based on advice from the Essential Services Commission. That is set to be equal to the 2025–26 forecast consumer price index as published by the Victorian government in the budget update, and that is a uniform cap that can apply across all councils. The ESC is responsible for administering the Fair Go Rates system in Victoria, providing advice to the Minister for Local Government on matters relating to that. In accordance with the *Local Government Act*, the average rate cap is based on the forecast CPI for the same year plus or minus any adjustments that are made at the discretion of the minister. In considering whether to recommend adjustments in the CPI the minister considers factors including financial stability in the sector, changes in councils' costs, expectations of future wage rises and recent economic forecasts. Overall the ESC observed that increases in council costs and actual inflation were in line with the rate cap in 2023–24, and that alignment is expected to continue in 2024–25.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Is that the only option for varying the rate cap? You mentioned minister's discretion. Do councils have other ways they can vary?

**Dan HARPER:** Yes, they do indeed. The decisions of individual councils, and whether they would like to, apply, but they are able to apply to the Essential Services Commission for a variation to the rate cap. They are not bound, firstly, to increase their rates by the full amount either. In 2024–25 we actually had two councils that adopted a rate rise below the set rate cap. That was Ararat, which actually had no increase at all, and Mansfield Shire Council, which allocated below the cap. Councils that determine that they need to raise more than that can apply, as I said, to the ESC for a higher rate cap. There is a process that is a transparent and fairly collaborative mechanism to deal with those and for them to report their varying financial circumstances. The 2025–26 financial year is actually the first time since 2019 that Victorian councils applied for higher rate cap. The ESC decision for both Hepburn and Indigo shire, where they have approved the higher rate caps, indicates that there probably is sufficient flexibility in the system. It is just that we actually have not had very many councils come forward since 2019 to actually apply. In this instance Hepburn successfully applied for a higher rate cap of 10 per cent for the forthcoming financial year. Their primary driver was the council's inability to fund essential services within their current cap. In making the decision the ESC noted that a higher cap is a key element of Hepburn's long-term financial stability. Similarly, the ESC approved Indigo's proposal for a higher cap of 7.54 per cent for 2025–26, noting the council's proactive approach to waste and recycling.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Thank you. I think one of the important services for families that councils deliver is libraries, but they do get support from the state government. What does that state government support look like?

**Dan HARPER:** Obviously libraries are an essential part of the culture that we have here in Victoria. Since 2015 the Victorian government has invested \$515 million into public libraries. We have invested more than \$451 million through the public libraries funding program to ensure libraries can continue to provide those collections, those services to the community, electronic resources, all of those types of things. \$53 million has been provided through the Living Libraries infrastructure fund to provide much-needed facilities and upgrades to those library services, and \$11 million has been provided for the Premiers' Reading Challenge Book Fund, which provides resources for children undertaking the Premiers' Reading Challenge to be able to undertake it free of charge for those that need to.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** I think we reached the end of the Premiers' Reading Challenge just a little while ago.

**Dan HARPER:** Yes, usually it runs in time with the terms of the school year.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** What is the point of it?

**Dan HARPER:** It is a great opportunity to encourage young children to read and to form a love of reading. Research shows that children who grow up in households with access to books and reading have better outcomes as they go through life. The Premiers' Reading Challenge is a great way to encourage those children to undertake that. With the support of the book fund there, it means it is accessible to all children.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Libraries are often a bit of a go-to for communities for more than just books, and it needs to be accessible for all. How are we making sure, I guess, that libraries are responsive to diverse community needs?

**Dan HARPER:** In terms of facilities, the Living Libraries infrastructure fund funds upgrades to the physical environment to ensure that they are accessible to all members of the community. That is vitally important so that we are not putting barriers in place in terms of accessibility for the community. Obviously councils also work really closely with their communities to ensure that all their spaces are safe and accessible.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Thanks very much for that. I also want to turn to the digital delivery of government services and Service Victoria. I am a big fan of the Servo Saver. At different times that I have had a look in my community there have been differences of 50 cents per litre between service stations. For the benefit perhaps even of the Deputy Chair, if we think of the types of cars that are driven in my community – like a Ford Ranger, a very typical sort of vehicle – we are looking at 70 or 80 litres, so you would be saving more than \$1000 each year if you are able to pick up savings like that which we can see on the app ad free, so I think it is fantastic. There is a whole suite of things, though, along with the Service Victoria app, but the Servo Saver – are you able to speak a bit more to that?

**John BATHO:** Yes, I would be happy to talk a bit more about the fair fuel and savings finder. As we have mentioned, the savings finder, which I might talk to first if that is okay, is a tool to help people quickly and simply identify rebates as well as discounts and savings which may be available to them. How the Service Victoria app is set up, it guides people through a few simple questions about their age, living situation and their circumstances and then does the eligibility assessment about what they may be eligible for at a first cut through. It then guides them to the next steps of the application process so the recommendations for savings are tailored to the individual's circumstances. Some of the examples of some of the savings or concessions are free weekend transport for seniors, free fishing licences for veterans and the \$100 power savings bonus for eligible concession holders. I think we have mentioned already that 2.6 million people have accessed the savings finder since its launch in August 2022. It helps people find unclaimed money as well. So that is a bit more detail about the savings finder tool.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Thank you. I know the parent portal has come about recently, but what I do not know much about – it is here in your questionnaire on page 13 – is Service Victoria's children's package.

**John BATHO:** Yes, so building on the work that we did with the parents portal, which was really the first cut through to uplift services to parents and which was bringing together a lot of different information, advice and services which were spread across government websites, we have now consolidated those into the parents portal, which will enable parents to access all the information that they need, or at least be guided to where they can best go to get that information. So that is really stage 1 of the work that we have been doing.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Are you telling me there is a handbook for parenting?

**John BATHO:** No. No, but I think what we are doing is a phased program of work to make life easier for parents. The parents portal very much is phase 1. We are looking at – and this goes back to the question about the digitisation of births, deaths and marriages – a digital birth certificate, as an example of what could be on the future road map of digital products to help parents. We are currently working towards having a pilot of a digital birth certificate available soon, so that is just another example of some of the work that we are doing as part of a broader package of digital products for parents.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** How does that intersect at the federal level? Because there are federal services that are available or that families rely on, what work has been undertaken to try and link up where possible with federal?

**John BATHO:** The primary national forum where we engage on these issues is the data and digital ministers forum, which meets twice a year. As part of that meeting there is a dedicated life events stream of

work, where we work with the Commonwealth and other jurisdictions to work out how we can better deliver services tailored around life events. For example, the birth of a child is one of the priority focus areas at that national level. It is about how we can bring together, all in one place, advice and the support services that parents need, irrespective of which tier of government is doing it. It is probably needless to say that anything that is happening at a national level does not always happen at a super quick pace, but what we are trying to do is build some of the strong connections in with the different service systems and even just get the advice that is on different jurisdictions' websites more consistent, so that when a parent goes to MyGov or a Commonwealth website, they are getting similar advice and directions that they would be getting from when they are going to a state-based website. So that is the flavour of some of the work that we are doing at a national level to bring together these different services.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** With the different offerings that are available on the Service Victoria app, I know that the licence was one of the first, but have you found that people sort of come for the licence and stay for the savings? Is the digital licence what pulls people in, or how does that work?

**John BATHO:** When we think of the Service Victoria app, there are definitely things which have more targeted appeal versus things which are more mainstream with wider demographic appeal, like the licence that you mentioned. I think when you look across the suite of products and services, there are products and services which are going to appeal to different demographics throughout their life. We have got the veterans card, which obviously appeals to one particular demographic, but then the drivers licence is one which has got broader mainstream capture. Then with Ls and Ps as well we are starting to get younger people onto the app, and once they are there, then they can get some of the other products and services, like savings finder and Servo Saver. We are hoping that as we add more, Service Victoria really is the place to go for government services and hopefully becomes more of a one-stop shop rather than having to navigate different websites and digital products.

**Jo de MORTON:** I think that is right. We tend to find that people come for a specific purpose. I do not think they are just sitting there going, 'Hey, I want to go and check out what government's doing.' Usually there is a need, and they come for that. Then it is trying to make it easy for people to prove their identity once and choose to save it for reuse if they want to, so next time they come and do it on Service Vic, because then it is easier. What we are finding is that people spend quite a bit of time clicking through to all of the things that are then on the app – those promotional tiles. They click on them, and they click on more than one. Once they are there, they are going, 'Oh, I didn't realise all this was available,' and they spend a bit of time seeing what benefits there might be for them.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Thank you.

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

**Richard WELCH:** Thank you, Chair. Secretary, cybersecurity is obviously a major concern. In 2023 there was the cyber strategy set up for a whole of government solution, significantly underpinned by the cyber defence centre. There was funding for that in the 2024–25 budget but no funding in the 2025–26 budget. What is the current status of the CDC?

**John BATHO:** Mr Welch, I think there was funding in the 2025–26 budget as well as the 2024–25 budget for cybersecurity.

**Richard WELCH:** There is a line item in 2024–25. There is no equivalent line item in 2025. Has it gone to another –

**Jo de MORTON:** It could have a different name.

**Richard WELCH:** Where would I find that funding?

**John BATHO:** If you bear with me, I will see if I can –

**Richard WELCH:** You can provide that on notice if you like, if it is going to take some time.

**John BATHO:** Yes, I am happy to confirm the funding. But you are right: there was investment in 2023–24 for the cyber defence centre and then some further investment in 2024–25 for core cybersecurity controls, which is all part of the department's cybersecurity capacity at the moment.

**Richard WELCH:** So it has been absorbed within another line item in the budget.

**Jo de MORTON:** It is a different initiative name, I think. I am pretty sure we said it in our questionnaire, but I am scuffling to find that as well.

**Richard WELCH:** Let us take that on notice if we could.

**John BATHO:** Yes.

**Richard WELCH:** Thank you. Is it still operating, and how many staff does it have?

**John BATHO:** I have not got the exact number of staff, but I am happy to talk you through the core capabilities that the –

**Richard WELCH:** That is fine. I am just interested in the number of staff. Can you provide that on notice?

**John BATHO:** I am happy to provide that.

**Richard WELCH:** Thank you. The funding was \$3.6 million a year when it was a line item. What is its current funding?

**John BATHO:** So at the moment the current funding, and I do not have the exact figure in front of me, but if you look at the phasing of the investment over the years –

**Richard WELCH:** It is fine. I just want the figure, actually. Can you provide the figures for what its currently funding is?

**John BATHO:** Yes. It is around about \$18 million or \$19 million that we have currently as capacity.

**Richard WELCH:** Per annum?

**John BATHO:** Which is the current per annum, which is the current capacity of the cyber centre.

**Richard WELCH:** Specifically for the CDC component? Not for other elements?

**John BATHO:** The CDC is the centralised cyber capability of the department. The cybersecurity money that we have would be to support the functions of the cyber defence centre.

**Richard WELCH:** But that 18 million you mentioned incorporates things out beyond the CDC?

**John BATHO:** The CDC represents the cybersecurity capability and capacity of the department, so that funding would be part of the CDC.

**Richard WELCH:** Okay. Great. Thank you. VAGO has reported that no government agency is able to conduct a complete server inventory. Can you explain why that is? Why don't we know where our servers are?

**John BATHO:** I think the first thing I would like to note about the VAGO report into cybersecurity and IT servers is that those recommendations are really important, and what we do around the asset management of our IT servers and the controls is one important part of cybersecurity, but it is only one part of cybersecurity.

**Richard WELCH:** No, granted that, but I am drilling down on that one part. So what I want to know is: how can we not know where our servers are?

**John BATHO:** I cannot speak for other departments, but –

**Richard WELCH:** But isn't it under your – especially under the CDC; I mean, surely we would have an audit of where our servers are.

**John BATHO:** I think this is where it might be useful just to give you a little bit of context about the CDC: our cyber defence centre is not running IT servers for departments, and we are not responsible for the cybersecurity risks of departments and agencies. We provide centralised services to departments and agencies.

**Richard WELCH:** Have you advised those departments they should really know where their servers are?

**John BATHO:** We do provide advice to departments and agencies –

**Richard WELCH:** Have you provided that advice?

**John BATHO:** As part of our response to the Auditor-General's recommendations, we will be providing guidance to departments and agencies on specific controls which the auditor –

**Richard WELCH:** Just a yes or no, really. Have you provided that advice?

**The CHAIR:** Mr Welch, Mr Batho is genuinely trying to answer your question. Just listen to his response before pre-empting –

**Richard WELCH:** I am limited by time.

**Jo de MORTON:** We do not take over the accountability for the technology of other departments. Our experts, though, will work with them and say, 'Can we help you?'

**Richard WELCH:** Understood. But do you then keep track yourself? Do you track the status of that advice, whether that advice has been acted on?

**John BATHO:** In certain contexts we would track the status of our advice, but it is particularly around – our key functions as a central cyber defence centre are around cybersecurity incident response.

**Richard WELCH:** So you do track it. How many departments are under tracking, if you like?

**John BATHO:** We track certain advice; as I think the Secretary mentioned, we do not take accountability for management of IT servers of other departments.

**Richard WELCH:** No, I understand you do not take accountability, but you are tracking it?

**John BATHO:** So it is part of our response.

**Richard WELCH:** Do you provide the data of which departments do not know where their servers are?

**John BATHO:** Part of the response to the Auditor-General is we will be providing advice and guidance to departments and agencies.

**Richard WELCH:** Could you provide it to this committee?

**John BATHO:** I think the point I am trying to make is that we have not yet provided that advice in response to the Victorian Auditor-General's recommendations.

**Jo de MORTON:** He has made a recommendation which we have accepted –

**John BATHO:** which we have accepted.

**Jo de MORTON:** but we have not done it yet.

**John BATHO:** These are very specific technical controls for the management of IT servers, which we are developing.

**Richard WELCH:** Okay. So, in a similar vein, every agency received the lowest possible rating against the Microsoft cloud security benchmark. Do you or do you not consider this a material risk to the state?

**John BATHO:** I think I would answer that by saying there are a number of risks to the state, and they are evolving –

**Richard WELCH:** But I am asking about this risk. Do you consider this to be a material risk to the state? Is it or isn't it?

**John BATHO:** I think with one particular issue in isolation, it is hard to give advice about whether that is a material risk.

**Richard WELCH:** You are telling me that having Microsoft's lowest possible rating across agencies is not a material risk?

**Jo de MORTON:** It depends what else they are doing in their cyber controls; so if they have got their controls in other places, it might not be a material risk, and if they do not then that would be –

**Richard WELCH:** You do not think this creates vulnerability? You do not think this is – how seriously are you taking this issue?

**Jo de MORTON:** If you want to talk to our chief information security officer, Dovid is here if you would like to call him to the table to give you a much more technical answer than we can give you.

**Richard WELCH:** Are you reviewing this situation? Are you planning to take action on this issue?

**Jo de MORTON:** Yes, I think that is what we have said: in relation to the VAGO report, we will have a good look at if there is more that needs to be done.

**Richard WELCH:** So it is not urgent? Is it an urgent good look or is it just a good look?

**John BATHO:** I think it is something which we have committed to timeframes on in our response to VAGO, to act on the recommendations.

**Richard WELCH:** When will you act on that recommendation?

**John BATHO:** I think it is by 30 June 2026. There are three recommendations, but I –

**Richard WELCH:** So eight months of vulnerability?

**Jo de MORTON:** Remembering that departments are accountable for addressing their own, so what we are looking at is systemically across what might need to be done centrally, not taking over accountability.

**Richard WELCH:** Yes, but do you think eight months is a satisfactory time period to resolve this?

**John BATHO:** Maybe I might – sorry, I have cut you off.

**Jo de MORTON:** I was just going to say, given the breadth of areas to be covered, it is more a pragmatic answer than one indicating importance.

**Richard WELCH:** Degree of risk?

**Jo de MORTON:** Yes. It is the extensiveness of the IT landscape across the whole of government and its agencies, so what Dovid will do is start to prioritise those risk areas.

**Richard WELCH:** So in your risk assessments, how high is this? Is this in the top quartile, bottom quartile? Where is it?

**John BATHO:** I think I am happy to –

**Jo de MORTON:** Dovid, do you want to?

**Richard WELCH:** I would understand it to be a material risk. In my view, this is a material risk, so I would like to know: is it in the top quartile of your priorities?

**The CHAIR:** Mr Welch, you have got Mr Clarke here, so perhaps you would like to direct the question to Mr Clarke.

**Dovid CLARKE:** Can I clarify: we are talking about the VAGO server audit and what quartile of risk that represents?

**Richard WELCH:** Yes.

**Dovid CLARKE:** Very small. The actual finding was the lack of automated scanning, not scanning. All departments were manually scanning; this is automated scanning. In the risk we are talking about on-premises and cloud servers. This was about inventory only – not patching, not legacy. So in the incident of risk and all the controls we have in place, this is not in the top quartile.

**Richard WELCH:** So the lowest possible rating is not a problem?

**Dovid CLARKE:** No, it is a different audit. Sorry. We are talking about the server audit. We are saying that

**Richard WELCH:** No, no, no – the Microsoft rating.

**Dovid CLARKE:** The Microsoft rating three years ago?

**Richard WELCH:** The most recent VAGO report. We will move on.

**Jo de MORTON:** Do you want the answer on the advertising costs that you asked about before?

**Jade BENHAM:** No, we have got some more questions, and we are happy to take those on notice.

**The CHAIR:** If the Secretary has the answer to the question you have previously asked –

**Jade BENHAM:** That is not the question we asked.

**The CHAIR:** It was a question you took on notice. Is that right? You have got the answer. What is the answer to that?

**Jo de MORTON:** Just very quickly, the advertising for the savings finder was \$7500. For Servo Saver there was nothing in the reporting period 2024–25. In 2025–26 it is done in-house. There is a VPS 5 that does it amongst their other duties.

**Jade BENHAM:** So what is the cost? There must be figures, though.

**Jo de MORTON:** It is a portion of their salary. They are just doing it internally.

**Jade BENHAM:** Okay.

**Richard WELCH:** Okay. Now, Cenitex is the state centralised IT provider. Why was it unable to prevent a complete server inventory?

**Dovid CLARKE:** Cenitex do not provide services across all departments, and they do not manage all the servers. Those that were in scope were deemed compliant under the audit.

**Richard WELCH:** Right. Those were deemed in scope. So which were out of scope?

**Dovid CLARKE:** As in, ones that are not managed by Cenitex at this point.

**Jo de MORTON:** Every department uses –

**Richard WELCH:** How many service providers do we have in this field?

**Dovid CLARKE:** I would need to take that on notice.

**Richard WELCH:** If you could, that would be helpful. Thank you. In the 2025–26 budget there does not appear to be much new investment in your broader digital government reform.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Welch, are we within the context of the terms of reference again, or am I back to telling you about that?

**Richard WELCH:** I do not know, I thought everyone would find it intellectually interesting to ponder about.

**The CHAIR:** Excuse me, I do not find it intellectually stimulating, so I will bring you back to the terms of reference, please.

**Richard WELCH:** Yes, Chair. You are overseeing the modernising of our digital services. Is your funding adequate for that?

**Jo de MORTON:** Well, there is plenty of work to be done in Service Victoria, which is doing the largest part of that work. They are fully booked. Could you have more? Of course. You could use all the money to do it. But do they have sufficient funding to complete their work program? Yes.

**Richard WELCH:** So how many years will it take at the current burn rate?

**Jo de MORTON:** I do not know. That is a good question. What we have noticed is that much of what Service Victoria is doing is actually new work and new programs. Initially the idea was that it would be replacing some of the existing ones, but a lot of it is new initiatives like the Servo Saver and like the parents portal.

**Richard WELCH:** So you are having scope added to what you do?

**Jo de MORTON:** Both. Yes, both.

**Richard WELCH:** Are you getting matching funding and resource increases?

**Jo de MORTON:** It is a work plan. With the funding that you see allocated to Service Victoria, there is a government process to determine the highest priority activities for Service Victoria for the year.

**Richard WELCH:** What are the highest priorities?

**Jo de MORTON:** The ones for last year are the ones we have been talking about today – things like adding the parents portal and the Servo Saver and the drivers licences.

**Richard WELCH:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. We will go to Mr Tak.

**Meng Heang TAK:** Thank you, Chair, Secretary and officials. I will turn to your point on cybersecurity. Budget paper 3, page 47 refers to funding provided for the initiative 'Cyber Safe Victoria 2026+ and Open Data'. Secretary, can you outline how DGS is improving the Victorian government's cybersecurity capacity and maturity?

**Jo de MORTON:** Thank you. Did you want to speak to that, or did you want Dovid to do it, seeing as he is still at the table?

**John BATHO:** I will do it. It is all right, Dovid. I am fine to do it. I might just set the context as well around cybersecurity. We lead progress towards a cybersafe Victoria, which is under the Victorian cybersecurity strategy. That has got three limbs, two of which the department is responsible for. The first is the safe and reliable delivery of government services. Then mission 2 is a cybersafe place to work, live and learn, which is the focus on cybercrime. Then the third mission, which is led by DJSIR, is a vibrant cybereconomy. We really focus on those first two missions. Then to support the delivery against the strategy we have got these publicly available mission delivery plans, which we release annually, which set out what our priorities are for the year ahead. Dovid also publishes backward-looking progress reports so that people can see what we have been doing over the last 12 months.

I will elaborate a little bit more on what we were doing in 2024–25 to uplift the cybersecurity of the state. We were really focused on improving cybersecurity by delivering expert cyberincident response and cyberthreat



intelligence, consequence management and coordination activities, which are those services where it really makes sense for them to be delivered from the centre, where it does not make sense for departments to be duplicating their own cyberincident response services, for example.

We also really focused on the perimeter of the state's network. Just to the conversation that we were having earlier about IT server controls, one of the critical things which we focus on is not so much what is inside the fortress but making sure that the fortress walls are protected. That is where we do vulnerability scanning across all internet-facing software, because that is where the vulnerabilities are. From the centre we provide that perimeter scanning and vulnerability service. We last year identified close to 6000 specific vulnerabilities. We were then able to give advice to departments about how to remediate those vulnerabilities, which really closed the key attack paths into government systems, which is really critical to safeguard essential government services but to also protect the data assets that we hold. We also in 2024–25 implemented two specific programs to uplift cybersecurity maturity across a select number of high-risk government agencies but also to uplift basic cybersecurity controls across all of the VPS.

We also have a focus on building the cyber-resilience of the Victorian community to make sure that people are safer when they are online. We worked through a number of community engagement activities last year. For example, we engaged a dedicated content series about demystifying multi-factor authentication, which is about having safe passwords to protect you online, as well as a series of self-help tools on the Service Victoria channels.

We have also got a dedicated program about uplifting cybersecurity maturity within government agencies and also to support skills, talent and career pathways as well. In 2024–25 we worked with 203 public sector organisations to understand and improve their cybermaturity. We also trained 91 board members, which is really critical to making sure that board members of public sector entities understand cybersecurity risks. That is really critical to providing that leadership and risk management over public sector entities.

We also continue to deliver our six-month cybersecurity internship program, where we employed seven certificate IV cybersecurity graduates as part of Dovid's team. Hopefully that gives you a flavour of what the types of activities that the department focused on were in 2024–25.

**Meng Heang TAK:** Yes. Thank you. There is a vast initiative. Just on a supplementary question in terms of how the Victorian government faces a range of cyber threats: how does the DGS respond to cyber threat intelligence and incidents, and what improvements have been made to incident detection and response capability?

**John BATHO:** Yes. I am happy to give you a brief overview, but I might also throw to Dovid in a moment to talk about some of the incident response capabilities that we have built in the department. As I mentioned earlier, we have the cyber defence centre, which has a 24/7 monitoring and incident response capability for the Victorian government. Throughout the 2024–25 financial year the cyber defence centre helped respond to over 2000 cyber threat intelligence activities – that is when we get a bit of intelligence that may indicate that there is a cyber vulnerability or threat. We also supported the response to over 260 cyber incidents. I think it is really important that every time we deal with a threat intelligence activity, that is helping prevent a threat intelligence activity becoming an actual cyber security incident which we then have to deal with. The centre has also improved the department's ability to identify, detect and block potential cyber threats to public sector IT networks. Capabilities in the centre now include threat intelligence, digital forensic and major incident response capability. We are also really focused on building up a strong relationship with the Australian Signals Directorate and the National Office of Cyber Security. These relationships are really important to enable quick information sharing that supports early detection as well as effective national coordination in response to national cyber incidents. But, Dovid, given that you are leading this capability, is there anything else that you would like to add on that?

**Dovid CLARKE:** I suppose the key one is our role in forewarning, where we can. Then if in the horrible event of an incident, it is helping support to reduce any impact or harms, particularly on our people and any community with that. We do that through in-house capabilities we have got through training our own people and Victorian public service to do that across a range of services. The intel one is a key one because we are scanning and looking for stuff that may impact us and trying to reduce the impact or harms that come early in that process, and having enough technical people to help support in the event of a significant incident as well.

**Meng Heang TAK:** Thank you. You talked earlier about community awareness of cybersecurity. Can I just go to that then, in terms of public awareness, which is essential to reducing cyber risk: what campaign or digital tool has the DGS implemented to improve community cyber security awareness and perhaps in the wider multicultural community, and how widely have these resources been accessed and utilised?

**John BATHO:** Yes. Thank you for the question, Mr Tak. As I mentioned, we have got a continuing focus on improving community cyber awareness and understanding through the delivery of tailored cyber safety and data security programs and campaigns through our digital channel. For example, through our Service Victoria platform we have delivered a suite of interactive, educational digital tools that have collectively been used over 130,000 times. For example, we have got a password strength tester, which enables people to check whether or not the password that they are using is strong and can withstand hacking attempts. I am noting that the stronger your password is, the harder it is to remember it, which can be a challenge. We have also got a cyber safety health check – people can go and check whether or not they are being safe online and what some of those simple tips and tricks are that they can do to reduce the threats against them from cyber attacks. I mentioned demystifying multi-factor authentication, as well as tools to help individuals understand when they may be the subject of a potential scam.

You also mentioned culturally and linguistically diverse groups. We have supported Victoria's different groups, including vulnerable groups in the community, to engage safely online. For example, we have been partnering with local councils and Victoria Police to deliver a series of information sessions for older Victorians on cyber safety and how to recognise scams. With Victoria's multicultural communities, we have also been supporting developing in-language translation content, which I know is not the solution entirely for engaging with culturally and linguistically diverse communities, but by having that translated content online, at least it is a step in the right direction. We did a strong push out to multicultural communities as part of Cyber Security Awareness Month, and we have also shared those translated materials with over 70 multicultural organisations as well, so they can work with their communities to disseminate that material. Dovid, is anything else that you wanted to add on our work with the community?

**Dovid CLARKE:** I suppose, if you forgive me, the great pathway was we pushed it through the Service Vic app. That is how we are able to keep the content up to date and get the tiles in there front and centre for people to see. We had a fantastic response.

**Meng Heang TAK:** Thank you. Moving on to the cyber workforce development, which you also mentioned earlier, a skilled workforce underpins cybersecurity. How is the DGS building cybersecurity skill across the public sector? What training has been provided to board members, and how is the cyber internship program contributing to workforce development?

**Jo de MORTON:** Thank you.

**John BATHO:** Thank you. I am happy to answer that question as well. As I mentioned, we do have the cybersecurity internship program, which I mentioned, where seven interns work in Dovid's area to build real-world cybersecurity skills. We have also worked really closely with the Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions to help champion cybersecurity workforce diversity. For example, there is the women in security program, which is supporting over 100 women with pathways to transition into cyber jobs and cyber leadership roles. The program provides participants with specialised training and certification, mentorship, career support and network opportunities. Then we also continued our engagement with other organisations, like Code Like a Girl, to spotlight and address gender inequality in the sector, because as we know, the technology sector has an under-representation of women in particular as part of its workforce. The department also hosted a booth at the Virtual Engineers Summit, where over 210 attendees came together to build the career confidence and employability of people who identify as a woman, non-binary or gender diverse.

To the second half of your question, in terms of training, we have been delivering training across Victorian government organisations to staff through induction program materials and also through e-learning modules which we make available. We also have the dedicated board member training program, where we trained, in 2024–25, 91 board members from across the VPS on cybersecurity. As I mentioned before, I think it is really important that organisational leaders understand the risks that cyber poses to their organisation.

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

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon. To start can I take us to the banking and financial services state purchasing contract? You might have had a heads-up about this because I raised it with DTF yesterday. Can you provide the committee with the amount of bank fees and charges paid by the state to each of the banks as part of that contract for management of the state's accounts?

**Jo de MORTON:** Thanks. Yes, I did see you ask that question yesterday. I cannot. The contract applies to over 1800 departments and agencies subject to the standing directions, and the contract value is around \$200 million over the five-year period. But the specific fees were commercial in confidence for those vendors who bid for the contract. You mentioned – I know you know – three of the four large banks bid at different rates. So what happens is those 1800 departments and agencies can look at the different prices across the different types of services offered and pick the ones that are the best value for money for them. Given that competitive nature of that tender, those fees are commercially sensitive to the vendors that bid for it.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Okay. Can you tell the committee a bit more about what those fees and charges are that we would be paying for management of those accounts?

**Jo de MORTON:** Yes. Let me have a go. The main ones I think would be the merchant fees for payments by credit cards, for example. Just like in the private sector, you pay a percentage of the transaction. The other ones are around interest, but of course then we earn interest and it offsets as well. There are fees for things like cheques that are quite high because the banking sector is trying to phase them out, and indeed will. So you find worse pricing for the areas they are trying to incentivise people to not use. They are the main ones: fees on transactions and then interest fees on money that is offset against interest earned.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Okay. And that figure you gave earlier of the total in fees paid – was that an exact number, or do you want to come back to the committee?

**Jo de MORTON:** No, that is the total value of the state purchase contract. I would not be able to give you the specific fees.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Okay. Thank you. And those three panel banks – do they offer different services to the government?

**Jo de MORTON:** You asked a really good question about competition in the marketplace as well. What we did through the tender was we put out a range of modules, so the core transactional banking, the merchant services, those kinds of things – purchasing cards, for example. The market was able to bid for some or all of those services, and we were trying to make sure that we could encourage a range of suppliers, including smaller suppliers and some of the more specialised banks who cannot offer the full suite of services, to participate just in some of the modules. That panel arrangement replaced the previous sole provider arrangement in trying to get that wider range of reporting capabilities, alternate products and services, a bit of innovation, things like payment gateways and such. I do not know, but again, in the schedules, departments can pick from the services offered by the different institutions the ones that suit their particular business needs.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Okay. Is it possible for the committee to be provided with a breakdown of what services are provided from which bank, so we can have more of a thorough assessment of what is going on?

**Jo de MORTON:** I will have a look. That seems possible, but let me go and check.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you. You touched on competition. Given three of the big four banks in this country are panel banks.

**Jo de MORTON:** Sorry, in the meantime, it is all available on the tenders website, but it is not at that granular – it gives the categories. I will see if there is something more granular.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you. That is much appreciated. Just on competition, which I was getting to, three of the big four banks in this country are panel banks under this arrangement. Is that truly competitive?

**Jo de MORTON:** Well, like I said, we did our best in the tender to break it down into those modular components to try and get the competition from those smaller vendors and from the fintech companies. But at the end of the day there was an evaluation panel of about 25 people that looked at all those bids. That was

before my time – that was back in 2021 – so I cannot speak to how much of that came out through that tender process.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Okay. Are we able to know who those people were, even on notice if necessary?

**Jo de MORTON:** I am not sure whether that is confidential or not, so let me take it on notice and see if I can find out.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you. I will move on to another matter. Recent rent reforms that were legislated in 2024 mean that new prescribed additional matters can be considered by the Director of Consumer Affairs Victoria in an excessive rent review application. Is one of those prescribed additional matters that the Director can now consider the actual amount of the increase?

**Nicole RICH:** Thanks, Mr Puglielli. I know you have been very interested in this area for a number of years. My understanding is that the legislation came into effect today, so we probably, like you, are eagerly awaiting the making of the regulations. As soon as they are made and gazetted, we will know what the additional criteria are. We are actually expecting that, my understanding is, imminently. Given the laws only took effect today, it could not be done before today. Genuinely, there are no current additional factors prescribed, but as soon as the regulations are made there will be.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Okay. Back in 2024, when the Minister for Housing before the house stated that matters to be considered would include the size or proportion of the proposed rent increase compared to the existing rent amount, given that that was provided to the Parliament, would the department expect that therefore that will be considered?

**Nicole RICH:** I mean, ultimately we will administer the regulations however they are made. But I do agree with you that that is currently not in the criteria, and it is a missing factor.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Okay. Thank you. Moving on, on owners corporations, is the owners corporations review expert panel considering changes to the voting structures to rectify issues people are experiencing, particularly when we have got vacant apartments or even more apartments that are being rented, meaning that many of the lot owners are not voting at all? Are those voting structures being considered by that panel?

**Lisa GANDOLFO:** Thanks for the question. I have not got the exact terms of reference on me unfortunately, so I cannot answer specifically, but it is a very comprehensive review. It would surprise me if it was not covering that. Do you know if it is covering that, Nicole?

**Nicole RICH:** There terms of reference are quite wide – I was actually looking at them this morning for another reason – so I am pretty sure that would be in scope. But until the panel reports – again, we are all waiting to find out what they say.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Yes. Are you able to come back to me just to confirm? Is that possible?

**Lisa GANDOLFO:** Yes. I can say what it will cover. It will cover the operation of reforms –

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** So is it voting structures specifically that are raised?

**Lisa GANDOLFO:** Voting requirements among lot owners; it includes that.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Okay. Would we expect that would include redefining special resolutions?

**Lisa GANDOLFO:** Potentially. We would have to see what the panel comes up with.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Okay. Thank you. Just moving on, looking at the Consumer Affairs annual report, page 25. In terms of Consumer Affairs Victoria's renting taskforce activities for the budget period, of the 1523 assessed rental property cases, how many of those resulted in enforcement action?

**Nicole RICH:** Thanks, Mr Puglielli. Yes, that is correct; that is the number of cases we have assessed. I think the stats are in the annual report as well. They are not necessarily directly referable, because we do different things depending on what the nature of the issues are that we are concerned about in the cases and

what we are assessing for. For example, we do report on direct engagements with renters there. That would be an example of where we are sort of working with renters to see if they will give us more information about what is happening in the case et cetera. Sometimes we need that for evidence. We did issue, as I said, nearly 130 official warnings for the year and 89 infringements – they are examples of formal enforcement actions that arise; and we did initiate five criminal prosecutions during the financial year as well – they are obviously pointier actions. There are other examples of things that can arise from the cases.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Okay. Thank you. Can I ask: does CAV collect data on renters choosing not to report due to fear of retaliation?

**Nicole RICH:** Look, no, it is not possible I guess for us to know the counterfactual of people who do not contact us, but I understand the point you are making. It is certainly a concerning issue. We did commission some research recently from the Consumer Policy Research Centre into the experience of renters and also the experience of rental providers. That has been published obviously in the current financial year. But the CPRC report into the renter experience does report on the percentage of renters that reported fear of retaliation as a factor, so I definitely commend that research to you. It is definitely informing our thinking as a regulator.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Okay. Thank you. Can I ask: of the 74 minimum standards inspection blitzes that were conducted, how many of them identified minimum standards breaches?

**Nicole RICH:** That is a good question. I will have the stats for that, but I will have to take that on notice.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Yes, that is okay. Thank you. Does CAV record how many complainants discontinue complaints processes part way through, prior to resolution of the issue that they had?

**Nicole RICH:** I am not aware that that is a data point specifically that we collect, sorry. Different cases as I say go through different pathways. There might be a range of reasons why something might not result in a formal enforcement action. I mean, yes, it is possible that it could be because a witness does not want to proceed, but I would not say that is overly common. It is just not something we capture data on.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Okay. Thank you. Can I ask: how many of the 89 infringement notices have been paid in full?

**Nicole RICH:** Again, I do not know the answer to that because it is administered by the Fines Victoria system, but we can take that on notice. If it is possible to get you that answer, we will try and do that.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Okay. Thank you. Can I confirm also: have any infringement notices been issued for Ballarat Real Estate?

**Nicole RICH:** We do not generally comment on individuals that have been subject to an infringement. There is a very good reason for that. They are not proven offences, and it is also very important for our compliance approach that we do not disclose that. We are trying to encourage, as I say, compliance and rectification. More generally, on Ballarat Real Estate, though, I am happy to comment just a bit. Again, we do not generally comment on individual businesses, but I am aware there has been a lot of public commentary about that business, so I am prepared to note that we did conduct an investigation, and it was quite a thorough one, but we concluded that there was no evidence of any breaches in relation to those complaints. I am very satisfied with the work that we have done and that there is no further action required in that instance at this time.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Okay. Thank you. Can I ask: of the total fines figure of \$706,004, how many fines comprise that total?

**Nicole RICH:** Sorry. Would you mind –

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** That total figure of fines – how many fines make up the total?

**Nicole RICH:** The total figure of infringement notices, sorry?

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Yes. So there is that \$706,000 figure, how many fines make up that total?

**Nicole RICH:** Oh, the \$706,000. That is all infringements. So that entire amount would be –

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Yes. How many infringements would add up to make that total?

**Nicole RICH:** Oh, the 89 infringements add up to that total. But obviously some breaches have different penalties.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Okay. Thank you. Can I ask: have any of those that have been issued been waived or withdrawn on review?

**Nicole RICH:** Yes. We do have an internal review process, as we are required to, and on occasion people will seek internal review. It is a regular part of our processes. On occasion infringements will be withdrawn. We do go through a rigorous process and carefully consider if we need to withdraw. But if we do feel like something like exceptional circumstances been made out or that further evidence is provided, we will withdraw a fine.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you.

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

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Thanks, Secretary, and thank you, officials, for being here this afternoon. I just thought I might start on births, deaths and marriages. On the questionnaire page 11, we talk about the program identity and worker screening services. I am just hoping to understand what improvements in service delivery and identity verification were included as part of this project.

**John BATHO:** Thanks very much, Mr Hilakari, for the question. Since we inherited the births, deaths and marriages registry, I think about three years ago now, we have had a really concerted program of reform to uplift the service, because it was very clear that the service was not meeting community expectations when it came into the department. Over the last three years we have done a whole variety of interventions, which I can talk through. But we are really pleased that we have now got contact centre wait times back in line with our own targets, but also in line with industry standards, so people are not waiting on the phone for any longer than they absolutely have to.

We are also getting certificate turnaround times really back within our target timeframes. I think for most certificate applications, people will get their certificate returned to them within three days if it is a straightforward application. We have done that through a whole variety of transformation and uplifts. Part of it is about, as the Secretary mentioned, consolidating into our whole of government contact centre. We have now got 29 different phone lines that we can spread that demand to, so on any given day we have got a lot more control over what wait times are going to be. We have done a lot of process improvements as well to speed up our back-office efficiency and how we process things.

We have had quite a few digital improvements as well, like we mentioned, as part of the department's opening presentation – online identity verification. For a lot of the people that can prove their identity online, that means that they can go straight through, prove their identity, order their certificate, and it will get posted to them straight away, which in reality what that means is that it frees up more of our operators and our staff to be supporting people who may need a greater offline assistance.

In the back end as well, one of the things which was really impacting our turnaround times, particularly on the phones but also in processing, was our back-end registry system, because the system, particularly at peak times when people were calling, was not always able to process fast enough. Through behind-the-scenes upgrades of the technology and environment, which that back-end registry is sitting in, we have now removed that lag time and that drag on our ability to process people's queries and also their applications in real time. So all those things, while not one silver bullet, have combined to create a registry which can deliver the services which the community expects. I just wanted to do a big shout-out for the staff of the registry as well. They have done a lot of a lot of extra effort and also been really open to different changes and ways of working as part of our transformation program. As we look forward, we are looking at things like a digital birth certificate as well for people who would like to use it. That is really the next phase of our transformation, which I think will –

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Has that pilot occurred already?

**John BATHO:** It has not occurred yet, but it is close to being announced. We should be looking to pilot over the next couple of months, so I am happy to keep you in the loop on that.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Well, it was in the questionnaire, so we are not giving away secrets there. I could see that you had a great deal of pride, and I acknowledge the staff's effort in terms of those wait times. What has that transformation been over these years? What did the wait time start at when it came to the Department of Government Services, and where are we looking at now?

**John BATHO:** I think on the contact centre wait times pre-DGS, it fluctuated, but I think at its worst peak it was over several hours wait time.

**Jo de MORTON:** I think the average was at 4½.

**John BATHO:** About 4½ hours. The wait times now can vary, but they are consistently well under 5 minutes, and often a lot quicker than that, sometimes as quick as under a minute, on average about 3 minutes or so. So I think that is –

**Jo de MORTON:** I think it is the processing of the certificates themselves as well.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** It is a really important time in their life as well.

**Jo de MORTON:** That is right, and when things were taking over the 14-day period, then people were waiting, they were not sure whether it was ever coming, so they were getting on the phone and going, 'Hey, where is it?' which makes the calls grow, makes them really anxious, because they are usually wanting to go on holiday and get a passport or something. Just really being able to get those turnaround times down has meant a lot for our staff, because they were doing their best and they were facing a lot of anger and aggression from people in the community that were understandably frustrated, so it really has made a very big difference for the community and for our staff. I think that is why we are just so pleased with all of the work that was put into it, just improving services. It is a good example.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Well done to everyone there, including yourselves, for driving that change. That is really fantastic. The worker screening unit – I am hoping you could outline some of the funding supports that were received and talk about the risk assessments, monitoring and the processing of worker screening applications.

**John BATHO:** Yes, I am happy to answer that question. Thank you, Mr Hilakari. I think we have already had some of the discussions in front of the committee about the funding allocated to the worker screening unit. But what the worker screening unit does – I might just give you an overview of the types of activities. They process both working with children checks and also NDIS worker screening, and it is a process for assessing and monitoring people who work with children but also people who work with disability. The funding supports the worker screening unit to assess applicants' criminal and disciplinary history, as well as to check against the national reference system, which is the national system that records working with children check exclusions from around the country, and then they use that to determine the suitability of applicants to work in various risk-assessed roles, whether it is working with children or working in risk-assessed roles in the disability sector, and the aim is to prevent harm to children and vulnerable community members. In 2024–25 over 540,000 applications were processed by the unit. That is either new applications or renewals.

What the unit also does is continuous weekly monitoring as well of every single clearance holder that holds a working with children check or an NDIS worker screening check. That is around 2 million holders of working with children checks and around 300,000 NDIS worker checks, and that is a weekly process which happens. We run every name through the police database plus on our register of everyone that has a relevant regulatory finding and against the national reference system as well. The funding also supports the department to participate in VCAT reviews when a decision is taken on appeal to VCAT, which sort of varies up and down depending on what the case loads are and how many reviews would go to VCAT. So that is just a summary of the activities which that funding supports.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Thank you. That is very appreciated. I was just going to take us to the management of Victoria's public records now, questionnaire page 12. I am just hoping you can outline how the funding

supports the operation of the Victorian archives centre and how that is going. I understand there has been a little bit of a drop in engagement from ancestry.com, but you might get there in the end of the question.

**John BATHO:** Yes. I am happy, Secretary, to answer that. The Victorian archives centre is the centre that is based out in North Melbourne. I think underground there are hundreds of kilometres of various historical records dating back from a couple of hundred years ago. The system is a giant air-proof container which has got heating and cooling and has to be climate controlled to preserve the state archives. There is a fair bit of sort of plant and equipment and maintenance that needs to happen to keep that facility operating effectively to preserve those records, so the funding which you are referencing was used to support maintenance of that plant and equipment and also to support the utility costs which are associated with maintaining that collection. As you mentioned as well, there is not just the physical collection for the Public Record Office; there is also the digital archives as well. The Public Record Office has a number of partners or providers which make access to digital records available to the community. I think what the Public Record Office has noticed is that there has been changing engagement strength with those digital records through providers like ancestry.com. I think there are some broader trends post COVID about people not doing that type of genealogical research as much as they –

**Mathew HILAKARI:** They are doing a little bit less of that, are they? Okay.

**Jo de MORTON:** Yes. It is going to be interesting to see whether that bounces back, but it is not showing it. So I think it was all that extra time in COVID.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** I think that is probably right. Look, I might take us to the Service Vic app. You mentioned there are 200 services, and it has a module structure to it. Can you give us some examples of how you are reusing that work so you are not replicating the costs over and over again by purchasing, you know, different resources?

**Jo de MORTON:** A really good example is when you have new services – and we talked about, you know, onboarding the new services – if you have a transaction it is not just in government, it is in the private sector as well. Customers are on this journey from need to outcome, and they go through a consistent pattern of kind of information discovery and choosing, you know – validating whether it is the right thing for them. Is that what I need to do? And then adding it to their cart before they pay, and then they get their product or their token, right. This is really common, and so the private sector is researching all of this and how to make that journey really seamless for people. We are certainly, you know, going to take the best of that and use it. We are not trying to reinvent the wheel there. But then the modules are kind of the same. So you build out your modules that are collecting certain things – say, a national police check. You need that in a worker screening. You need it in NDIS. You need it in a raft of different transactions. So we have built a police check module that any time a new service is onboarding, it just API integrates into that module. The benefit of those kinds of things, whether it is that module or payments or accounts or whatever, is people uplift that module and have kind of ownership of that. They keep it cybersafe, and all its patches. You uplift it once, and then all of the hundreds of services that use it do not have to pay for that same uplift in technology. So that is at the core of it – how to minimise your future investment rather than a lot of bespoke apps. You know, it was back to the conversation before about, well, it must be cheaper just to get one someone has built before, but because it is built in a different way, every time you try and update it across hundreds of different services, it is not the efficient way to architect at a whole-of-government level.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** I think that is fantastic, and I hope to see that expand more over time. I was interested to see that the most viewed on the Service Victoria app – number 6 – is ‘Report a red tape issue’. What happens to red-tape issues once they are reported? It might be a broader question for other departments as well.

**John BATHO:** Sorry, I did not quite hear the question.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** ‘Report a red tape issue’ is number 6 on your most viewed on the Service Vic app. It was not, I think looking at number 6, top for me. Where does it go after you report a red-tape issue?

**John BATHO:** We take that, and we have got a number of streams of work which are not run necessarily by the Department of Government Services. I think the Department of Treasury and Finance has a regulatory reform stream, so we pass that information on to them.



**Mathew HILAKARI:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Thank you, Mr Hilakari. Well, Secretary and officials, thank you very much for appearing before the committee today. The committee is going to follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing, and responses are required within five working days of the committee's request when you get that letter.

The committee is going to take a short break before commencing its consideration of Court Services Victoria at 3:45 pm. I declare this hearing adjourned.

**Witnesses withdrew.**