

# **PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE**

## **2021–22 Budget Estimates**

Melbourne—Monday, 21 June 2021

### **MEMBERS**

Ms Lizzie Blandthorn—Chair

Mr Richard Riordan—Deputy Chair

Mr Sam Hibbins

Mr David Limbrick

Mr Gary Maas

Mr James Newbury

Mr Danny O’Brien

Ms Pauline Richards

Mr Tim Richardson

Ms Nina Taylor



**WITNESSES**

Mr Colin Brooks, MP, Speaker of the Legislative Assembly,

Mr Nazih Elasmr, MLC, President of the Legislative Council,

Mr Peter Lochert, Secretary, Department of Parliamentary Services,

Ms Bridget Noonan, Clerk of the Legislative Assembly, and

Mr Andrew Young, Clerk of the Legislative Council, Parliament of Victoria.

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

I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional Aboriginal owners of the land on which we are meeting. We pay our respects to them, their culture, their elders past, present and future and elders from other communities who may be here today.

On behalf of the Parliament, the committee is conducting this Inquiry into the 2021–22 Budget Estimates. Its aim is to scrutinise public administration and finance to improve outcomes for the Victorian community.

Please note that witnesses and members may remove their masks when speaking to the committee but must replace them afterwards.

Mobile telephones and computers should be turned to silent.

All evidence taken by this committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. Comments repeated outside this hearing may not be protected by this privilege.

You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript to check. Verified transcripts, presentations and handouts will be placed on the committee's website as soon as possible.

We welcome the Presiding Officers, the clerks and the Secretary, and we invite you to make a 5-minute presentation, which will be followed by questions from the committee.

**Visual presentation.**

**Mr BROOKS:** Thank you very much, Chair. Last year—I take the blame for speaking too long and running out of the 5 minutes allotted. I think we had a 15-minute presentation. So the President has very kindly asked me just to talk for 5 minutes on this presentation, and then I can take the blame for it again. Also I will just touch on the topics on the screen, and if members want to come back to ask particular questions about issues, then please do so.

The first slide is really just an overview of the appropriation made to the parliamentary departments for the coming financial year compared to the previous one. So this is, I suppose, a sum of the amounts that are in the appropriation Bill that went through the Parliament and has now been presented to the Governor.

Next slide. Again we include this every year, I think, just to give people a sense of where the major resource allocations are in terms of the parliamentary output budget. You will see there that the lion's share of the funding in the service department, the members administered budgets and the budgets that are controlled directly by members—EO&C budgets, training budgets and so forth, and the relatively small but important work of the Assembly, Council and Committees.

Next slide. Just running through some of the achievements from the current financial year, some of these flow through into work we are doing in the coming period, into the estimates. Of course the COVID response—I am sure you have dealt with much of that across different government departments. That involves making sure that we are able to have our staff working remotely, including EOs—wellbeing, training and security. The charity meals program has been one of the upsides—one of the few upsides—of the pandemic, making sure we are utilising our kitchens and our staff to support vulnerable Victorians. There has been an uptick in security incidents; I will come to that in a moment. We have been able to maintain most of our construction activity,

with some disruptions. New electorate office standards have been worked up by DPS in consultation with members and the House Committee and put into place. VIRTIPS—the new framework, if you like, around allowances in our budgets—has continued to be administered and rolled out. The chamber audio upgrade: members who were not here on non-sitting days probably have not seen the work that has been going on, but the chairs in the chambers have been ripped out and new wiring and system put in, which needed to happen. Electorate office internet speed has been upgraded, and the parliamentary officer EBA has been successfully negotiated, and we are in the midst of the electorate officer EBA, where there is an in-principle agreement.

Members will be well aware of the sitting at the Royal Exhibition Building around the tabling of the royal commission report into mental health and also the Council's sitting in Bright, and I think members have suggested that both of those were seen as very successful events.

There has also been another silver lining, if you like, on the real difficulties around COVID. The tour guides education team here have been running incursions, so online excursions, if you like, for schools. That has become a real feature, and it is not just for people who cannot get in here because of COVID but also for regional schools that might not want to make the full trip. So that has been a good outcome as well.

I have pretty much touched on those issues; I might just skip that slide and go to the next one. Major building works: members are aware that there is significant work happening in the precinct. Two big projects: the east wing project, which is about extra space to the top of the building, plus replacing fire stairs and lifts—the main lifts, with two fit-for-purpose lifts—so very important in terms of health and safety and fire safety; and also the stonework restoration. We are now entering our last stage of the stonework restoration, thank goodness. That is an important project protecting the Parliament.

Sorry, yes, the next slide. Security continues to be a key focus for the Parliament, and you will note there that there has been a near doubling of security incidents in this current financial year, and 13 individuals have been charged by Victoria Police for making threats against MPs.

Cybersecurity: there is a very big focus and resource investment in cybersecurity. We do not intend to go into great detail today in what is a public forum, but if the committee wishes further details in a confidential way, we would be very happy to provide the committee with that on a confidential basis. Suffice to say, as you can see from that chart, there are, on average, over 1000 phishing emails hitting Parliament every day, so there is a significant cyberthreat to the Parliament and we are working hard to protect members and the Parliament's systems.

The priorities looking forward: as I said, cybersecurity, COVID workplace, *Disability Action and Inclusion Plan*—a really important piece of work that the Parliament is driving—

And I will leave it to members to ask questions.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Speaker. I will pass to Mr Newbury.

**Mr NEWBURY:** Thank you. I thank you all. Looking at the department's questionnaire I can see that there are currently roughly 328 FT equivalent electorate office staff, Secretary, which I presume—and correct me if I am wrong—would be maybe 700—

**Mr LOCHERT:** Thereabouts.

**Mr NEWBURY:** if you took that out into people, and then maybe another 100 on top of that if you included casuals—I think I can see there are about another 70 on top of that in terms of casuals—so roughly 800 people. It is not a fixed figure, but roughly speaking. Does that sound about right?

**Mr LOCHERT:** About right.

**Mr NEWBURY:** And all of the staff do mandatory induction training within six months of employment, is that right?

**Mr LOCHERT:** Correct.

**Mr NEWBURY:** How does the agenda for the mandatory training for all the electorate office staff get set?

**Mr LOCHERT:** It has been set over time as part of discussions internally, and they bring together, I guess—excuse me, I will take the mask off—

**The CHAIR:** Sorry, Mr Newbury, I am not sure that this question is relevant to the budget estimates.

**Mr NEWBURY:** Completely. The Parliament provides mandatory induction training, and I am talking about their training. It is completely within budget. I am not sure how—

**The CHAIR:** This inquiry is to consider the forward estimates.

**Mr NEWBURY:** Absolutely, and the cost of training staff.

**The CHAIR:** If you could, for the benefit of the committee, relate your question to the forward estimates, that would be appreciated.

**Mr NEWBURY:** I am talking about the government funding, through the parliamentary department, of staff training—completely within the scope. Sorry.

**Mr LOCHERT:** The topics that are covered relate a lot to their enterprise agreement requirements, mandatory elements like occupational health and safety, behaviours, code of conduct—that sort of thing. In addition, we have sessions on the different areas of, I guess, concern that we would like electorate officers to have a little bit of training or awareness of, and there are things like security, maintenance of electorate offices, cybersecurity et cetera. Those topics are discussed internally within DPS and they are put up for approval for the Presiding Officers and then they are implemented.

**Mr NEWBURY:** Terrific, and I presume, to keep it contemporary, the Presiding Officers would be aware of those programs in having that discussion. Perhaps you sit in on them from time to time or are at least aware of what is happening.

**Mr BROOKS:** Yes, we are aware of what is happening. The induction program, as the Secretary has indicated, is predominantly focused around our key risk areas. So as the Secretary has outlined: security, OH&S, appropriate workplace behaviour—those sorts of issues—cybersecurity. But it also provides new electorate officers with an opportunity to sort of better understand how they can find their way around Parliament—not in a physical sense alone but also the services that are provided, so how they can do the job better, how they can hit the ground running, if you like, for the members that they work for.

**Mr NEWBURY:** I actually sat in on last month's one—not all of it, just some of it, just to see what was happening. One of the things that surprised me is there was a CPSU recruitment drive in the middle of the training session which is paid for by the taxpayer. I actually sat in on it, so I know what was said. What would your view be of a required induction program being used as a union recruitment drive?

**Mr BROOKS:** So through you, Chair, with respect to Mr Newbury, I think the invitation extended to the CPSU to address electorate officers who are being put through an induction program is an opt in. It is presented, as I understand it, at morning tea. So members of staff do not have to—

**Mr NEWBURY:** Can I give you perhaps the agenda: there is morning tea and then there is an agenda item for CPSU. So I am happy to provide you—

**The CHAIR:** Mr Newbury, could you allow the Speaker the opportunity to answer the question, please.

**Mr BROOKS:** I have been advised that it is at a morning tea break and it is an opt in. If that has not been the case, that will be the case in the future. The CPSU is an important stakeholder in terms of the parliamentary workforce and they have requested an opportunity to speak to new staff. And as I say, it is not compulsory for staff to attend that component.

**Mr NEWBURY:** Well, I am really glad that you have mentioned that in the future that will be the case because having sat in on it, there was a morning tea break and then the recruitment drive, and that session was actually nothing more than a recruitment drive. Considering we are all being paid by the taxpayer, a mandatory union recruitment drive obviously to some people will be, you know, something that perhaps they do not want

to hear, and there was not an opt-out opportunity for all staff; it was a mandatory requirement. That obviously would be the concern to many Victorians, I would think. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Maas.

**Mr MAAS:** Thank you, Chair, and thank you, everyone, for your attendance today. I do note just following on from Mr Newbury that there are of course those sorts of provisions which are included in enterprise collective bargaining agreements. It may well be a term of the agreement, but I am not—

**Mr Newbury** interjected.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Newbury, you do not have the call.

**Mr MAAS:** But I am not going to continue down that line of questioning.

**Mr Newbury** interjected.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Newbury, you are out of order. You do not have the call.

**Mr Newbury** interjected.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Newbury!

**Mr MAAS:** If I could take you to your presentation, Speaker, and this is a question for the Speaker and the President. You made some points regarding the COVID response, including remote working and remote participation. I was hoping you would be able to explain for the committee how the actions that have been taken have enabled the Parliament and indeed members of Parliament to continue functioning throughout this period, and continue functioning smoothly.

**Mr BROOKS:** Thanks very much—through you, Chair—Mr Maas. I might start with a few broad comments about some of the things we have done as a Parliament to support members and electorate officers in their fairly rapid move to working from home when COVID hit and then I suppose the follow-up that has been provided and continues to provided, and then I might ask the Secretary to just add to my answer.

**Mr MAAS:** Sure.

**Mr BROOKS:** One of the key things has been to bring forward the purchase of laptops for use in electorate offices to move away from desktops. It is something we were going to do anyway, but COVID has really brought home the fact that we need to allow electorate officers to be able to pick up their computer if they need to work somewhere else and be able to do that in a more flexible way. Docking stations, screens and those laptops are on order and should be provided fairly shortly. I think there is an allocation of one particular notebook per office that will have a higher use. I am not an IT geek, so I do not understand the ins and outs of it, but it is a computer that I understand is much better to be used for things like graphics and those sorts of things that many members use for their social media presence.

There has also been a big focus on wellbeing, so staff wellbeing. We have been making sure that when members ask their staff to work from home and the staff are able to do that that they are not under any further stress than they otherwise would be. I am aware of a number of incidents, particularly during last year's longer lockdown, where many staff were feeling quite jaded by working from home and then being stuck at home, and that plays on people's mental health. So there has been a big focus from the Parliament as well on that. I might hand over to the Secretary to complete that answer.

**Mr MAAS:** Sure. Thank you.

**Mr LOCHERT:** Thanks, Mr Maas. Through the Chair, the interesting thing for us in DPS was that in a sense COVID accelerated a trend that we were already observing and a pathway that we had already engaged in. I mean, there is very little doubt that the profile, I guess, of members has changed significantly in the last few years. The last election alone brought a drop of about 14 years in the average age of MPs. So the people that we are serving as MPs are younger, digital natives, much more savvy, and most importantly much more

mobile. So that meant we were in a fairly good position when COVID hit and we needed to help people to work remotely. I will not repeat the sorts of things the Speaker outlined.

So for us the question now is: what are we learning from all of those experiences and where are we going to? We are de-emphasising that static office environment, not because we do not think it is relevant anymore—on the contrary, it remains very relevant—but the option of working anywhere in a hybrid mode makes us think about new ways of working from systems, equipment, the fact that you do not just have to sit on a PC to be able to access Oracle financials. Members should be able to approve time sheets, finance, orders, payments et cetera on their mobile phones. The ability to work from home for electorate officers is critical for us as well.

**Mr MAAS:** Thank you, Secretary.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Secretary. Mr Richardson.

**Mr RICHARDSON:** Thank you. I am jumping in for the crossbenchers, but I will carry on Mr Maas's line of questioning, acknowledging as well that the electorate officers have been extraordinary across all parties in their direct face engagement, on the phones or on correspondence with people doing it tough and have shown the best part of our sector in this difficult time.

Going into a bit more detail on those that have really struggled during this period in this pandemic, on the flipside our Parliament has been a showcase of support for people in vulnerable circumstances who have faced difficulties. I wanted to refer to part of the presentation, Speaker and President, the charity meals program, which was set up to support struggling Victorians. For the committee's benefit, are you able to update us on that program and the success of that program to date?

**Mr ELASMAR:** All right. Thanks, Speaker. And thank you for your question. My understanding is that the program, as you said, was very highly respected. I would really like to thank the parliamentary staff to start with and the former President and the Speaker, because they established that and I continued it. My understanding is that the program will finish at the end of June. To date I think there have been about 1.5 million meals distributed thanks to the eight charities who they have helped to do so. The estimate was about \$3.5 million, but I will ask Peter to update more on the program because I know that there is more training coming and things like that. Thanks, Peter.

**Mr LOCHERT:** Thank you. As the President outlined, the meals program was very much a strategy, I suppose, to focus on how the infrastructure of the Parliament and the staff that exist in the Parliament and who would not be performing the normal functions, as in catering, while the precinct was closed—how we could utilise those and put some benefit into the community. Originally we were able to start some of the funding through programs that had either been delayed or suspended. After that we made a submission to ERC, and we were funded to the tune of \$3.78 million for a full year of operation under the meals program. The number of partners that we had varied a little bit through the program, with some coming on and others coming off, but in total towards the end of the program we produced about 1.5 million meals that we distributed.

One of the things that we started doing a few months out, particularly as the lockdowns freed up and we could see a little bit of a way out, was to start helping those partners to transition. We knew that the appropriation would finish on 30 June—we could not carry forward—so it was a way of enabling those charities to take some benefit that they could carry into their future years, places like St Peter's Eastern Hill, Lazarus, Heaven at the Hill homeless enterprise, the Salvation Army in particular, the Father Bob foundation, St Vincent's, St Mary's Mission of Hope and Melbourne City Mission. For example, St Peter's Eastern Hill, the church behind us, run a very active program. As part of that transition they have asked us could we train their staff to be baristas, to do front-of-house service and things like that. So that not only helps them continue their own work but it helps them to get work opportunities and employment opportunities to some of their clients. For Father Bob, on the other hand, we have continued to provide breakfast and healthy meals all the way through, and so on and so on for different partners and charities.

**Mr RICHARDSON:** That is fantastic. I think that has shown the best part of the Parliament, and for the staff as well during that time it has been incredible, that benefit.

**Mr LOCHERT:** I think it is fair to say that the staff have been extraordinarily proud of what they have done and their sense of achievement has been extraordinary. But what for me in particular is heartening is just the recognition that the staff themselves got for what they were doing.

**Mr RICHARDSON:** I think it is a wonderful thing. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr Richardson. Mr Newbury.

**Mr NEWBURY:** Thank you. If I can refer back to the slide presentation earlier and talking about security and features that are available both in the precinct and also in electorate offices, I take it that if required under investigation, where there are incidents, there are points of surveillance that are available, as would be appropriately requested—things like CCTV, swipe-in, QR codes and things like that, Secretary.

**Mr LOCHERT:** There are, Mr Newbury. They are part of the infrastructure that we have available, and we have some very tight, and I would even use the word ‘restrictive’, policies around access to any of that data outside of the—

**Mr NEWBURY:** So Presiding Officers, if needed, or—

**Mr LOCHERT:** Well, there are very strict conditions under which they would be seen outside of DPS or the security agencies.

**Mr NEWBURY:** Yes. Look, the Speaker has confirmed an investigation into the Member for Ringwood bonking in his office.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Newbury, you are out of order.

*Members interjecting.*

**Mr NEWBURY:** Has any information been sought in relation to those surveillance items?

**Ms RICHARDS:** A point of order.

*Members interjecting.*

**The CHAIR:** Mr Newbury, you are out of order. Ms Richards has a point of order.

**Mr NEWBURY:** Of course. Please, Labor.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Newbury! Ms Richards.

**Ms RICHARDS:** On a point of order, this is way outside the scope of this inquiry—

**Mr NEWBURY:** Look, if there is bonking going on in parliamentary offices—

**The CHAIR:** Mr Newbury!

**Mr NEWBURY:** I think understanding where the investigation is up to—

**The CHAIR:** Mr Newbury!

**Mr NEWBURY:** The Speaker said there is an investigation.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Newbury, could you please stop yelling over the top of me.

**Mr NEWBURY:** I think understanding where that is up to is perfectly reasonable.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Newbury, could you stop yelling over top of me.

**Mr NEWBURY:** Look, if Labor want to bonk in their offices, that is okay, but we should at least have an investigation into it, understand what is happening—



**The CHAIR:** Mr Newbury, could you stop throwing your hand at me and could you stop yelling over the top of me.

**Mr NEWBURY:** and action be taken.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Newbury!

**Mr NEWBURY:** Getting an update for Victorians is perfectly reasonable.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Newbury, you are out of order. You are absolutely out of order. Ms Richards is trying to speak, and you are yelling over the top of her and the Chair.

**Mr NEWBURY:** Labor is trying to shut it down. That is what Labor is trying to do.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Newbury! Ms Richards.

**Ms RICHARDS:** I have a further point of order, Chair. This is a workplace and—

**Mr NEWBURY:** Indeed! That is my point.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Newbury!

**Mr NEWBURY:** There are Labor MPs who have been caught bonking in their offices.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Newbury, I am trying to hear Ms Richards on the point of order—

**Mr NEWBURY:** This is a workplace.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Newbury, I am trying to hear Ms Richards over the top of you, and I do not appreciate being screamed at.

**Ms RICHARDS:** Sorry, Chair. I do not expect to have voices raised. This is way outside—

**Mr NEWBURY:** I do not expect people bonking in their offices, but indeed it is happening.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Newbury!

**Ms RICHARDS:** This is way outside the scope of this inquiry, and I ask you to—

**Mr NEWBURY:** No, the Speaker has confirmed there is an inquiry underway—

**The CHAIR:** Mr Newbury, your behaviour is completely out of order and disrespectful.

**Mr NEWBURY:** There is an inquiry underway.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Newbury!

**Mr NEWBURY:** It is completely within the scope for me to ask where that is up to.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Newbury, I am attempting to hear Ms Richards on the point of order. If you would then like to contribute on the point of order, I will invite you to contribute on the point of order. In the meantime, I would like you to stop screaming over the top of me and over the top of Ms Richards.

**Mr NEWBURY:** I am not screaming.

**The CHAIR:** You were screaming.

**Mr NEWBURY:** No, wrong.

**The CHAIR:** Ms Richards.

**Ms RICHARDS:** Chair, I would ask you to rule this line of questioning out of order.

**Mr NEWBURY:** Can I contribute on the point of order, please?

**The CHAIR:** Any further contributions on the point of order? Mr Newbury.

**Mr NEWBURY:** Chair, the Speaker confirmed in a front page of the *Herald*—

**The CHAIR:** Mr Newbury, on the point of order—

**Mr NEWBURY:** Hang on, hang on. I will—excuse me, can I please contribute to the point of order? That an investigation was underway into a sex romp in Parliament House—

**The CHAIR:** Mr Newbury, on the point of order.

**Mr NEWBURY:** I think it is completely within reason for me to ask what departmental resources have been used in relation to that investigation, where it is up to, the time frame. I mean, normally things are not confirmed in terms of public confirmation by Speaker, but in this case he has actually put a quote on the record—

**The CHAIR:** Mr Newbury!

**Mr NEWBURY:** so I think it is completely right for me to ask where that is up to.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr Newbury. Are there any further contributions on the point of order?

**Mr RICHARDSON:** Chair, I seek your guidance on a couple of things. One is your role as Chair and in ruling that you are given the ability to rule, and when a member is speaking over the top of you—

**Mr NEWBURY:** No, no—running a Labor closed shop.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Newbury, could you stop.

**Mr NEWBURY:** That is what the Chair's job is: running a Labor closed shop.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Newbury, you are yelling over the top of me again.

**Mr NEWBURY:** No, I am not.

**The CHAIR:** You are.

**Mr RICHARDSON:** My understanding is that the Chair role of PAEC, indeed of every committee, is similar to the role the President or Speaker holds. The second thing I wanted to caution Mr Newbury on, through a point of order, is imputations on members. There is a well-established pathway of direct imputations on members, and I would caution him on casting imputations directly on members of Parliament. It is out of order and completely disorderly in committee form or in the procedures of the house, and so—

**Mr NEWBURY:** I completely understand Labor does not want the member—

**The CHAIR:** Mr Newbury!

**Mr NEWBURY:** I get that—

**The CHAIR:** Mr Newbury! You have had—

**Mr NEWBURY:** but if there is bonking going on in Parliament, it is completely reasonable to ask what has happened with that investigation.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Newbury! Could you please stop yelling over the top of other people. You have had your opportunity.

**Mr NEWBURY:** Victorians would not expect this to be happening.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Newbury!

**Mr NEWBURY:** It is outrageous.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Newbury, what is outrageous is your behaviour. Could you please stop yelling over the top of—

**Mr NEWBURY:** Look, Labor Chair, I understand you are running a protection racket—

**The CHAIR:** Mr Newbury!

**Mr NEWBURY:** but we know the Member for Ringwood has been bonking in his office—

**The CHAIR:** Mr Newbury!

**Mr NEWBURY:** and I want an update on where that is up to.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Newbury, you are out of order. Ms Taylor.

**Ms TAYLOR:** I take exception to Mr Newbury continually casting aspersions on our Chair, who is conducting the committee according to the rules of the committee and trying her best to keep the terms and the discussion of the committee within the ambit of the budget estimates. She is simply doing her job, and continually putting her down and undermining her—

**Mr NEWBURY:** I am not putting her down.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Newbury!

**Mr NEWBURY:** Saying that the Chair is Labor is not a put-down; it is a fact.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Newbury! Mr Newbury, you are out of order.

**Mr NEWBURY:** The Independents are not even here anymore. They have got no faith in what is going on.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Newbury, you are out of order, and you are now casting imputations on members that are not here.

**Mr NEWBURY:** I am not casting any imputations.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Newbury, your question was absolutely out of order, and I would also caution you about making imputations on members. Your time has expired. I will pass the call to Ms Richards.

**Ms RICHARDS:** Thank you, Chair. I would like to draw back to the initial questions, and particularly to the way the Parliament is functioning and the importance of it functioning smoothly. Of course we all have a much greater understanding now of how audio upgrades need to be cautiously and smoothly upgraded, so I am interested in having some understanding and perhaps asking you to provide some insights to the committee on that element of the functioning of the Parliament.

**Mr BROOKS:** Thank you very much—through you, Chair—Ms Richards. The existing—the previous system for chamber audio had been in place for the best part of a decade and was beginning to reach the end of its guaranteed life. We probably could have squeezed quite a few more years out of it, but I am pretty sure that members of Parliament would not look kindly on the Presiding Officers if the system fell over in the middle of a sitting week. So there is a very cautious approach to these things, and we therefore brought forward some funding to replace the chamber audio equipment. We were provided funding through an ERSC bid, and that work, the main physical work in the chamber, has now been completed. There is still some work to be completed in the unit outside of the chamber, but I cannot remember what that is called. Matt Smith down there is probably able to yell it out, but it is an important piece of work. It makes sure that, one, the system has some ongoing viability and we are sure that it will work, but also in the future if we need to upgrade different levels of technology in terms of the chamber it allows us to do that as well.

As I said, it is a project that, if you have been around the place on a non-sitting week, when the workers have had the chamber pulled apart and that cabling going through, has been quite significant. Many kilometres of cabling have been wired through that chamber—both the Council and the Assembly now. And that work has

obviously had to have occurred outside of sitting times so that they could put everything back together again when the Parliament sits. Like many things in this place, the work programs have to work around the rhythm of the two houses and the committees that work out of this place. So the guys in IT, broadcast and buildings and grounds have done a great job in working around us as members of Parliament and getting that work done. It is progressing on track. There has been some delay in sourcing components such as microphones because of COVID. They come from overseas, and there have been COVID restraints on some of that. But they will be provided in I think August. I can double-check for the committee, but I think August was the date at which they were looking to change over the systems. Secretary, did you want to add any more to that?

**Mr LOCHERT:** Not a lot more than to highlight, I guess, to the committee that when we are doing something like a sound system replacement the physical aspects of it are very easy to see, ripping the chamber to bits and wiring it and then having to put it together; the interesting thing in terms of those systems is that there is a great deal of automation and programming that goes on in the background, and that integrates not only the sound system but the video. It is used both for Hansard purposes but also for webcasting, and the extent to which that work has to be custom made for a Parliament-type of operation is quite significant. It is not the sort of thing that you can buy from an IT supplier or a company of any kind. So we rely on a number of programmers and suppliers, many of them working interstate, and COVID again not only in terms of the supply of equipment, as the Speaker indicated, has really stressed our planning and the ability to deliver. So the program is running a little behind but will be completed by August, and hopefully being able to travel—we have got some programmers in Western Australia, others in Queensland, and those are two places where travel to and from is not that easy.

**Ms RICHARDS:** I do not have enough time left to ask any more, but I will ask you to pass on our thanks to the terrific Hansard team and all the other people that go into making sure that our audio and the things that we can experience are really topnotch. They are a credit to the Parliament.

**Mr LOCHERT:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Ms Richards. Mr Newbury.

**Mr NEWBURY:** On QR codes, I understand the Parliament and precinct switched over to Service Victoria QR codes on 27 May, a day before they became mandatory. What third-party provider was used prior to that date?

**Mr BROOKS:** We will take that question on notice. I could not tell you off the top of my head.

**Mr NEWBURY:** You are not aware of the company?

**Mr BROOKS:** Not off the top of my head, no.

**Mr NEWBURY:** Okay. Can I ask what public health advice or advice was taken into not using the state's QR code system and using a different code system? I guess I am saying, what was the reason behind using an alternate other than the state system?

**Mr BROOKS:** That is another question I have to take notice. From my memory, there was not a clear discussion at the Presiding Officer level about which system to use. We wanted to make sure that our systems were compliant with the relevant requirements around contact tracing and the QR systems, and they were at all times. I think the system that was used immediately prior to the Services Victoria app standing up was also one that was compatible, or compliant, or the system would talk to the government's system so the information was able to be accessed. But on the—

**Mr NEWBURY:** Did I hear you saying that, in terms of the Presiding Officers, you did not make the decision at your level? So you were briefed on what was happening but did not actually make the decision, is that right?

**Mr BROOKS:** I think there was a discussion around the timing, and I think in that last week we thought during a sitting week if we could change over on the Friday and be compliant, which we were, it was a better thing to do than to maybe switch systems midweek when members and staff were coming to and from the precinct.

**Mr NEWBURY:** Could I then ask, Secretary, was that a decision in your remit, in terms of using an alternate provider?

**Mr LOCHERT:** Not specifically. The way that it works within the Parliament, we have a COVID subcommittee that brings staff across from the three departments and committees. And looking at the directions and—you know, that is essentially where the solutions were developed from.

**Mr NEWBURY:** So the committee would have met, you would have decided to have a QR code system and then the committee would have decided in relation to the initial provider, that provider. So would there have been a tendering process, how would it have worked?

**Mr LOCHERT:** I can take that on notice. The specifics I do not have with me, but—

**Mr NEWBURY:** I think the Speaker is—

**Mr BROOKS:** I think it is probably best if we get a comprehensive answer to you about these questions.

**Mr NEWBURY:** Do you mind?

**Mr BROOKS:** Yes.

**Mr NEWBURY:** So what I am interested in is how it happened initially, how the decision was taken, the cost perhaps, was there a tendering process, how many QR code sign-ins were available under the previous model. So just a fulsome understanding of that.

**Mr BROOKS:** Certainly. Absolutely. Chair, we will take that question on notice.

**Mr NEWBURY:** And also just if you would not mind in that answer, I am just interested in understanding perhaps also the reason why. I do not know if there is any capacity to understand the reason why. I do not know if it perhaps a separate question to take on notice, the data that was used in terms of that sign-in. I mean, I do not know. Secretary, do you have any idea on data management for that period of time?

**Mr LOCHERT:** Look, I think it would be better if I take that on notice. The one thing that I can say in general terms is that any of the systems that we do have of that type the data management is, you know, very tightly controlled, and any access would be very tightly controlled. In terms of the purpose for which it was collected, we did not have any incidents in here to which we needed to respond by accessing the data.

**Mr NEWBURY:** Just my own recollection, there was the one cleaner.

**Mr LOCHERT:** Yes, that was a lot earlier.

**Mr NEWBURY:** Yes, yes. Okay. Under the old—that was pre?

**Mr LOCHERT:** Yes.

**Mr NEWBURY:** Right, okay. So in terms of the server and the security of the data, who would be responsible for that?

**Mr LOCHERT:** We would be, in DPS. We manage it.

**Mr NEWBURY:** Okay. And the server, in terms of storing the data, you think?

**Mr LOCHERT:** Correct. We would.

**Mr NEWBURY:** Okay. So there has been no request at any time for any data?

**Mr LOCHERT:** Not that I am aware of. But I would not expect there to have been any, given that there has not been an incident.

**Mr NEWBURY:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Ms Taylor.

**Ms TAYLOR:** Yes. So you mentioned before about cybersecurity issues, and I am sure it is a perpetual challenge, as it is across the globe, and it would be good to understand more about what has gone into that process and what we are doing in that regard.

**Mr BROOKS:** Thank you, Ms Taylor—through you, Chair. As I said during the presentation, cybersecurity is an area where, for obvious reasons, we tread cautiously in terms of what we say in public, but it is fair to say that we have to deal with the same range of challenges that other parliaments and government organisations face. There is a good overview I noticed in budget paper 3, which I think talks about:

... systems testing, training and awareness programs, improve incident response mechanisms, embed 24-hour cyber event logging and upgrade existing information and communication technology security systems—

improving our—

... ability to prevent and respond to cybersecurity threats.

It is a broad statement, but it gives you a flavour of the things that our investment in this space is aiming to deal with. Again, one of the things that I think there will be a very strong focus on as well is personal behaviour, so that is user behaviour of our systems. Again, I will not go into great detail on that, but I think over the next 12 months you will see quite a lot of requests from the Parliament to engage with members and their staff around how they use our systems and how they can do so in a way which protects the information that they have as well as the information and our systems more generally at the Parliament. So that is probably the best answer I can give you, I think, unless the Secretary wants to add to that. It is one of those areas we do not want to go to in a public forum in great detail. We are happy to provide further briefings, if members want to take that on a confidential basis, but for the purposes of this committee today, if it is okay, we might leave it at about that.

**Ms TAYLOR:** Fair enough. I get where you are coming from. I believe in your presentation you also touched on the issue of accessibility, like physical accessibility to Parliament. Can you provide the committee with some info on the expected outcomes of the disabilities and inclusion plan?

**Mr BROOKS:** This is a great piece of work. We have not given the Clerk of the Parliaments a chance—Andrew, did you want to talk about this *Disability Action and Inclusion Plan* as well, or did you want me to kick off?

**Mr YOUNG:** Look, either way.

**Mr BROOKS:** I might start, and then we might flick over. As members appreciate, in terms of physical access and accessibility we have this beautiful building that we are all charged with passing on to the next generation of Victorians, but it is a building that does not reflect modern accessibility standards, and so many of the improvements that we do to the building—the members annex accommodation, the east wing project— increase accessibility and will make it easier for people with different accessibility challenges. But the group that we have established has really highlighted the fact that it is not just about physical access to the precinct or electorate offices but also staff awareness of accessibility issues. So the committee, which includes representatives from disability groups, has provided some great advice on training staff and making them aware.

Our website accessibility is a really key challenge as well, making sure that our new website, which will go live later this year, is much more accessible to people with different disabilities as well. So it is not just the precinct. We often think about the precinct when we think of accessibility, because it is sort of the iconic symbol of the Parliament, but access to members' electorate offices and access electronically to the Parliament online and to members of Parliament—contact—is really important. That is probably some of the key work.

There is a disability access audit on the precinct beginning soon. I think the tender is out for that work at the moment, and that will come back with some recommendations about how we might be able to make the building in its current form more accessible to people as well. That is probably a bit of an overview. Andrew, did you want to add to it, or Peter?

**Mr YOUNG:** If you like, Mr Speaker. Just that this work has meant that the Parliament is now a gold member of what is called the Australian Network on Disability, which is a membership-based, for-purpose organisation that supports organisations to advance the inclusion of people with disabilities. We all know what

a challenge this building is, being 170 years old almost, in terms of not being purpose-built with disability access in mind. So I think that this is just a first step, but the other great thing is it comes out of a leadership program within the Parliament of our middle management group.

**Ms TAYLOR:** Excellent. Good stuff.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Deputy Chair.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Thanks, Chair. Good afternoon, folks. Nice to see us on this side of the questions. Just a quick question to Mr Lochert: can you tell us what the size difference is between the Legislative Council and Legislative Assembly chambers?

**Mr LOCHERT:** As in?

**Mr RIORDAN:** The physical size. They look approximately same-sized rooms.

**Mr LOCHERT:** Yes. I cannot—

**Mr RIORDAN:** With all the wonderful renovations, have you had them measured up?

**Mr LOCHERT:** Yes. I cannot tell you off the top of my head, but—

**The CHAIR:** Mr Riordan, I am sure the Secretary has come prepared to answer questions about the estimates, not necessarily about the physical nature of the chamber. Could you relate your questions to the estimates papers, please?

**Mr RIORDAN:** Thank you, Chair.

**Mr LOCHERT:** They are relatively similar. It is the fit-out and I guess how the space is occupied.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Okay. I thought they were similar. I mean, you and I have done our odd tour around the place, so thank you. So my question to the Speaker: Speaker, how do we justify the difference through this COVID pandemic in the last year of the effective operation of the Parliament when in the LC chamber it is perfectly safe with coronavirus to have 50 people in there but in our chamber, the Legislative Assembly, it is deadly to have more than 38? What medical advice gives us the difference?

**Mr BROOKS:** Every sitting week that has been held in the Assembly since the pandemic began—was it March or April last year?—has been on the basis of health advice, which is circulated, I understand, through to all members. And so, for example, the health advice for the coming sitting week provides a density quotient of one person per 4 square metres. So in the Assembly the Serjeant-at-Arms provides a figure that is a maximum figure of people in the chamber. That would include clerks and attendants, who need to come in and out quickly on a limited basis—we have sort of scaled that back as much as we could—the broadcast operator, Hansard officials and then members of Parliament, so effectively how many people can be fit in on that density quotient. And then there is a discussion between the Leader of the House and the Manager of Opposition Business about how to make that number work and what the ratios are, if you like, in terms of the numbers of government MPs, opposition MPs and crossbenchers. That is then the subject of a motion at the beginning of every sitting week. So at the beginning of every sitting week the house has agreed to the numbers in the chamber.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Yes. So there is not really a medical reason why one chamber holds so many more people than the other.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Riordan, I would ask that you relate your questions to the estimates.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Well, we are paying for the use of the building, and it seems to me that—

**The CHAIR:** For the benefit of the committee, could you endeavour to relate your questions to the estimates, and for assistance of committee members sometimes a budget reference is helpful too.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Yes. Well, it is on the ongoing costs. Does it cost more to run the Parliament chamber when we have only got 38 people in it and the multiple cleaning—

**Mr BROOKS:** I think it goes without saying that if we are cleaning more regularly, there will be higher cleaning costs. Look, I think it is a small cost in terms of complying with the health advice and ensuring that the Parliament sits, and I think the overarching desire through the whole pandemic has been to keep the Parliament sitting so that it can carry out its legislative and scrutiny functions.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Okay. So assuming that you have not asked why our quota is so much less than the upper house, have you sought clarification on the medical advice this week, which has us even having to be more dangerous in the chamber and having to stand further apart than what we have on all the other medical advice for the last 12 months?

**Mr BROOKS:** My understanding is that the letter—

**Mr RIORDAN:** Apparently at GMHBA Stadium you can put 7000 people in one bay and they can yell and scream and cheer all they like and it is perfectly safe—

**The CHAIR:** Mr Riordan, you are straying far—

**Mr RIORDAN:** Apparently we are more dangerous with our yelling and screaming in Parliament.

**The CHAIR:** from the scrutiny of the budget estimates for the 2021–22 financial year, and I would ask that you bring your questions back to material that relates to the 2021–22—

**Mr RIORDAN:** So page 67 of the department questionnaire lists a cost of \$15 048 for ‘Cabling for IPTV—Minister Wing’. I guess this is for you, Mr Lochert. What does this expenditure refer to?

**Mr LOCHERT:** Sorry, can you take me to the page again?

**Mr RIORDAN:** It is page 67 of the departmental questionnaire. It lists a cost of \$15 048 for cabling for IPTV in the ministerial wing. Perhaps take that on notice.

**Mr LOCHERT:** I will.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Thank you.

**Mr LOCHERT:** Sorry.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Secretary.

**Mr NEWBURY:** Chair, point of order.

**The CHAIR:** Point of order, Mr Newbury.

**Mr NEWBURY:** Chair, twice in that questioning you interjected—sorry, you raised issues with the Deputy Chair that were in my view a covert political fix, and I think it is totally inappropriate for the Chair to use their role to make political interventions on behalf of the sitting government. I think that is clearly what happened.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Richardson, on the point of order.

**Mr RICHARDSON:** Just on that, the Chair is full within their realm and remit, where questioners are straying wildly beyond the pale of the budget estimates and asking directly about matters that were covered in the COVID-19 response hearing—of which the Member for Brighton was not a member previously—to make rulings to bring it back to the terms of reference that have been set down to deliver this inquiry and this hearing.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr Richardson.

**Mr NEWBURY:** Further to—

**The CHAIR:** No, you cannot contribute further. I do not need any further contributions on the point of order. I rule the point of order out of order. I was attempting to bring this meeting back to the consideration of the 2021–22 budget estimates. Questions from the opposition end of the table have strayed wildly from the core purpose of this inquiry, and I was attempting to refocus the discussion—



**Mr Newbury** interjected.

**The CHAIR:** If you could please not interrupt the Chair when I am speaking.

**Mr NEWBURY:** And all I asked was the same in return.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much. Mr Richardson.

**Mr RICHARDSON:** Thank you, Chair. I refer, probably the Speaker and President, to the historic recommendations from the Victorian mental health royal commission that were delivered recently. I know the Presiding Officers worked incredibly hard to facilitate the Royal Exhibition Building special sitting. Having the report handed down at that location obviously showed the importance and the significance of that occasion. For the committee's benefit, are you able to tell us about that response from the community?

**Mr BROOKS:** I will kick off. The President might wish to talk about the sitting in Bright, but it is fair to say that the Assembly did not have a lot of time, a lot of notice, in terms of the sitting at the exhibition building, and there was some nervousness about how we would be able to organise an offsite sitting quickly. I think the first thing that I want to do on the record is to thank the whole team who were involved in organising that particular sitting at the exhibition building for such an important occasion. I will not mention the names because I am bound to forget someone in the organisation, but the cooperation across all of the parliamentary departments was fantastic. Of course the Council, even though they were not part of that sitting, were very much involved in assisting with resources and helping the Assembly to deliver that. DPS, chamber, broadcasting, those sorts of areas—security—were fantastic. And also I should mention Victoria Police. Obviously going to an offsite location for a sitting, they have to assist with security and provide the main point of security, and they did a great job on the day. Also I think the team at the exhibition building were great as well. I think it was their first booking post COVID lockdown, so that was a good boost for them to have the Parliament come. I think it was the first time that Parliament had sat at the exhibition building since 1927, when we came back to these digs, so it was a significant moment.

If you look at some of the feedback that we received from people who work in the mental health field who were there on the day, I think they were overwhelmingly positive about being brought into the Parliament and made to feel that the Parliament saw them as central to how the Victorian Parliament was viewing the issue of mental health. So it was a really proud moment I think for the Parliament, and thankfully everything went off without a hitch. I think I made one slip in my chairing of the session, which I will not relive, but it was a really good day. I think the other value to this is it means that we know that under pressure Parliament can pick up and set up somewhere at reasonably good pace. We like to think that we are safe and secure here, but if we ever needed to find another venue for whatever reason quickly, we could do that.

President, about Bright?

**Mr ELASMAR:** Again, I support what you said, Mr Speaker, in thanking the parliamentary staff, everyone: IT, security and management. The regional sitting was very successful. The people of Bright and the Alpine shire in the community were connected. I must say that a lot of work was done there, not only just the sitting but visiting schools and community leaders and inviting them to attend. Other things happened there—hospitality by the Country Women's Association and the broadcast. I have to acknowledge that was a very successful sitting. The Alpine shire showed a lot of support for our sitting, the students and the schools who visited. That happened because of the bushfire recovery; that is why we decided to sit in Bright. It was very successful. And again, I must thank the staff and everyone: the community there, the Alpine shire, the students who attended and participated, broadcast, IT, security systems and staff—I must add that.

**Mr RICHARDSON:** I do not know if I will be able to sneak in another one. I might just say quickly, I am really interested in the online lessons and tours for students and the disproportionate nature, with the lockdowns, of the impact on regional and rural students. I am just wondering if you could elaborate a bit on the changes that have been made to an online forum for our students.

**Ms NOONAN:** Yes, sure. I will answer that one very quickly. The online incursions, which are tours directly into a schoolroom from here, mean that we get better coverage of rural and regional tours. We used to do five or six visits to regions once a year. We will hope to continue to do that, but the incursions are a constant part of our program now.

**Mr RICHARDSON:** Fantastic. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much, and that concludes the time we have set aside for consideration of the estimates with you this afternoon. The committee will follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing, and responses are required within 10 working days of the committee's request.

The committee will now take a short break before beginning consideration of the police portfolio. We thank you for your time here today. I declare this hearing adjourned. Thank you.

**Mr BROOKS:** Thanks, Chair.

**Mr ELASMAR:** Thank you.

**Witnesses withdrew.**