

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

Louise Anderson, Chief Executive Officer, and

Peter Benns, Chief Finance Officer, Court Services Victoria.

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

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

All evidence taken by the 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. Now, 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.

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.

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

I welcome the CEO of Court Services Victoria, Ms Louise Anderson, as well as Mr Benns over there. Ms Anderson, I am going to 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.

Louise ANDERSON: Thank you very much, Chair. Good afternoon, committee. I am Louise Anderson, Chief Executive Officer of Court Services Victoria, and with me is Peter Benns, the Chief Finance Officer of Court Services Victoria.

Before I turn to the PowerPoint, I acknowledge that I am meeting with you on the lands of the traditional custodians, the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation, and I pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging and to all First Peoples in the room or on the live stream today.

Visual presentation.

Louise ANDERSON: I acknowledge that there are some new members of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee since last I appeared, so welcome and congratulations. I will take a moment to speak about CSV, not eating in too much to the 10 minutes.

Court Services Victoria is an independent statutory body corporate established under the *Court Services Victoria Act* on 1 July 2014. We are now in our 11th year of operation. Our primary purpose is to provide administrative services and facilities to support the independent operation of the Victorian courts, the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal, the judicial college and the judicial commission. Collectively we refer to that as the courts group. The courts' and VCAT's primary output is to administer justice fairly, transparently, impartially and with integrity.

As a diagram, that may not mean very much to the committee – my apologies – but it is endeavouring to show you, as we come together with the courts group, that CSV supports the Victorian courts as the judicial branch of government and also that we support Courts Council, which is our governing body. Council governs our strategy, risk and related matters and is chaired by Chief Justice Richard Niall.

In terms of our key operations for the reporting period, our actual appropriation plus income was just short of \$900 million. Our appropriation covers employee costs, remuneration for judicial officers and tribunal

members, provision and maintenance of 78 court and tribunal facilities across the state and related corporate services. We employ around 2800 staff, most of whom work within the courts and the tribunal to support the work of over 550 judicial officers and VCAT members. We posted a slight surplus at the end of last financial year, which is set out in our annual report and noted there for the purpose of transparency.

In terms of our performance indicators, there has been a 31 per cent decrease in pending matters since the peak post the pandemic in 2022, although in some courts there has been an number of increases in pending. There was a 3 per cent overall decrease in the latter part of the previous financial year. Pending matters decreased in the Children's Court and VCAT by 4 and 20 per cent respectively; mainly VCAT was in residential tenancies. Pending matters did increase in the Supreme Court, the County Court, the Magistrates' and Coroners between a range of 4 to 12 per cent. Principally for the Magistrates' Court it was criminal initiations, family violence intervention orders and bail. In the Supreme Court it was an increase across multiple divisions, particularly institutional abuse cases and personal injury matters, and in the County Court there was an increase in insolvency.

One of our strategic limbs is to support contemporary, safe and integrated venues or courthouses. Wyndham Law Courts were completed in 2024–25. The Magistrates' Court, Children's Court, VCAT and its new rental dispute list commenced operations outside the reporting period, but I thought it was appropriate to refer to it here. In terms of some of the user data – again outside the reporting period – for Wyndham, there has been over 1000 matters listed in the Magistrates' Court since it opened on 10 November, over 40 matters listed in the Children's Court and around 600 people attending court per day.

Specialist family violence courts continue to be a focus of both government investment and Court Services Victoria delivery, particularly the Magistrates' Court. I acknowledge that today is the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. Continuing on our implementation of the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Family Violence, we continue to provide safe and accessible courthouses, finalising the refitting of existing courts in Latrobe, Sunshine and Ringwood with specialist family violence courts. We have further to deliver in 2026.

While the formal opening of Rental Dispute Resolution Victoria within VCAT was in June 2025, it worked from a pilot from September 2024. In that period it had resolved almost 5000 matters absent going to hearing at around a 26-day median from initiation to finalisation.

Reliable, integrated and innovative technology underpins the work of all Victorian courts and the tribunal. We continue to deliver business-as-usual functions, such as video conferencing upgrades, to ensure that online courts can continue to function at a high level of reliability. There were the County Court e-courts where we, at the request of the County Court, repurposed some civil courts into both technology courts but also jury courts to create and meet the demand in the County Court. We continue to build, on time and on budget, the VCAT CBD accommodation.

Other technology initiatives include the case management system. This has been with us for a while now, but we are getting very close to going live for the criminal release. It has already been released and is live for civil matters in the Children's Court and the Magistrates' Court and child protection in the Children's Court, with just short of 30,000 users across Victoria. The work in VCAT on modernising multiple legacy case management systems into one Microsoft Dynamics solution is well underway, with residential tenancy and civil being digitised and guardianship being next.

Diverse, collaborative, ethical and capable people is another key aspect of our strategic plan. We have a very strong focus on wellbeing, safety and security for staff, particularly because of the nature of the work that most staff within the courts are exposed to. We have set up a new psychological health and safety team and also launched a new wellbeing service with extended coverage. We continue to be very committed to deepening cultural capability across the courts, ensuring that we are well placed to support all First Nations people, whether staff, lawyers, witnesses or accused, and have a Koori staff network cultural connections program as well as working very closely with over 100 elders and respected persons who are principally appointed by CSV to assist the Koori Courts but also support us in a number of elements of our governance.

We continue to exceed our targets of Koori employment across the courts. It extends to the Koori Courts, where again, through funding, Koori Courts have been expanded to now sit across 39 sites. The County Court,

Magistrates' Court and Children's Court all operate Koori Courts principally, as I am sure the committee knows, where a person has pleaded guilty – the Koori Courts are sentencing courts. We have also reactivated our courts education program that went into abeyance during the pandemic but also was not funded until just recently, and from May to June of this calendar year, or the financial year past, 825 VCE legal studies students from 34 schools visited the courts. It is run by the judiciary in the main, and the judicial officers commit their time to supporting the studies of those in those VCE programs. I think I have made it in time. Thank you, Chair. That is it.

The CHAIR: The first 6 minutes is going to the Deputy Chair.

Roma BRITNELL: Thank you. I have got a couple of questions this afternoon. Bail applications are being fast-tracked across the state's Magistrates' Court ahead of matters involving victims. As a result, more than 11,000 criminal cases were not finalised last financial year, the worst outcome since 2021–22 at the pandemic's height. The Magistrates' Court of Victoria's latest annual report shows record bail hearings in 2024–25, an increase of 82,000 hearings on the year before. Has the department modelled the impact of recent bail reforms, or has Court Services Victoria modelled the impact of recent bail reforms and the potential for further reforms on the court system? What modelling was conducted?

Louise ANDERSON: Thank you, Deputy Chair. Court Services Victoria does not ordinarily model the impact of proposed legislative reform. That does, as I think you indicated, primarily sit with the relevant department – that is, the Department of Justice and Community Safety. To the extent that we were aware and working with the Magistrates' Court, Children's Court and Supreme Court – because all three have a role in bail – there was certainly some understanding that the March and then September 2025 changes to the bail legislation would likely both increase the number of bail applications and potentially add to some of the complexity.

So as you have referred to, in the Magistrates' Court annual report but also the data that I have, it shows that Magistrates' Court bail applications have increased around 18 per cent, with refusals 32 per cent above the last financial year – a similar trend you can see in the Children's Court. With the Magistrates' Courts in parallel there has been an increase in criminal initiations as well, so that has resulted in a pressure or a demand on the Magistrates' Court. Ordinarily, all courts would hear bail applications as a matter of priority because people are either held on remand or will be held on remand till that bail application is heard, so there is community safety and community importance for those matters to be heard as a matter of priority. The Magistrates' Court is, in particular, focusing on how it can address that demand, and it has got two important initiatives in place. One is the remote remand court, where matters that are not necessarily first remand but are related to bail come through a centrally coordinated court that is online. It assists both in consistency but also in managing the demand. And the other is the intensive case management list, so where there may be bail and related offences of one alleged offender that are multiple across the state and they have been pulled together into one court in Melbourne and heard, as a matter both of convenience and also endeavouring to be far more efficient. It is certainly delivering some great results in terms of throughput.

Roma BRITNELL: Did Court Services Victoria warn cabinet that the bail applications would surge?

Louise ANDERSON: It is not a matter for us. We did not brief cabinet, nor would we ordinarily do so.

Roma BRITNELL: A previous PAEC court services questionnaire showed a funding cut of \$26 million a year. What impact is that cut having on the court more broadly?

Louise ANDERSON: In the last questionnaire before PAEC we identified that our appropriation had been reduced by \$26 million and I think are certainly on record as having said that we will work with government to identify what services we may stop and how we will accommodate that reduction in our appropriation. We have done some work to address the pressure on our budget. That involves some job losses. It involves driving value from contracts and reducing duplication. There is only so far we can go to really address that level of budget pressure, so we do continue to work with government. We have not as yet got a resolution to that, but we are continuing to work closely and use our best endeavours to address that budget shortfall.

Roma BRITNELL: Taking into consideration what you just said, did the government consider the impact on justice timelines for victims, including family violence victims, before introducing these bail changes?

Louise ANDERSON: That is not something, Deputy Chair, I am in a position to answer.

Roma BRITNELL: But you said you are in discussions of how it would play out.

Louise ANDERSON: Around the reduction in our appropriation of \$26 million. That is separate to any legislative reform.

Roma BRITNELL: The effects of that cut on victims of family violence and timelines for victims, the consideration that cut would have on those – was that brought to the government's attention?

Louise ANDERSON: The discussion that we are having is focusing on how meeting that budget pressure will not adversely impact any of our frontline services – the courts – and therefore CSV are very strong in the view that we need to do all we can to address those savings without adversely impacting the front line.

Roma BRITNELL: How many jobs were cut as a result of that \$26 million?

Louise ANDERSON: We have not done any yet, because we have not come to an agreement with government as to how we will address that \$26 million.

Roma BRITNELL: How many do you perceive – if you have not come to it, but you have been doing it – will be lost?

Louise ANDERSON: Last financial year – every number reflects a person and their job, so I am not endeavouring to reflect –

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Anderson. We will swing back this way. We are going to Mr Hilakari.

Mathew HILAKARI: Thank you. You will be shocked to hear that I want to talk all about the Wyndham Law Courts. It was a wonderful opening recently, and it was a really important moment for the community that I represent. But I will take us back to the 2024–25 year and the building and development of it. The building itself, what sorts of facilities will we see, and what important contributions were made by people working within the courts system to prepare court services that are I think just state of the art?

Louise ANDERSON: Thank you very much, Mr Hilakari. I might just, if I may, take a liberty relating to the reporting period. Because it is a high-value high-risk project, the Treasury-appointed gateway review concluded their assessment of our readiness to open, and that was concluded on 2 October 2025. The finding was that the project team had strongly positioned the project through its evidence planning over the design, construction, operation or commissioning phases; extensive stakeholder engagement; sound management of risk, program budget and quality outcomes; purposefully leveraging corporate experience on previous projects such as Bendigo; and a strong commitment to deliver a modern digital court building that facilitates the best possible delivery of justice services.

Mathew HILAKARI: That is a ringing endorsement.

Louise ANDERSON: It was. We got a green, which I do not think is always the way with gateway reviews. With respect in particular to your question, the Wyndham Law Courts itself provides 13 courtrooms, four hearing rooms, three mediation suites, 33 secure entrances – and I will come to that in a moment, Mr Hilakari – and 26 holding day cells. It accommodates justice agencies such as Victoria Legal Aid; Westjustice; community corrections; the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing; child protection; the Victorian Aboriginal Child and Community Agency; Victoria Police, notwithstanding their magnificent building next door; education; the Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service; and Djirra. And that is not comprehensive; there is also Court Network and others. While I call that out and ask for the committee's indulgence for that list, it is important because it reflects that this court is an integrated court with its community. It is intended to be a safe and secure, highly functioning court facility that provides a one-stop shop, to the extent it can, for people who come through the court door.

I know when you and Ms Connolly visited, you could see the importance of having such a powerfully, strongly aesthetic but also relevant building in the west. It is a very important civic building, and both the landscaping and the physicality of it really reflect the intent of delivering a modern, safe and secure justice. As people walk through, there is a real focus on safety and security. Particularly there are three circulation pathways reflecting

safety for family violence: people who are seeking the protection of the court for family violence, children and young people, and then other adults and others who come through a separate door. There are safe waiting areas. There is particular architectural design based on really sound research that shows both the use of the materials – there is a lot of natural material – and the overuse, where we could, of natural light. The level of ceiling height, the space, creates an environment where people's stress should start to leave as they move through the building. While I know that is outside the reporting period, anecdotally, from speaking with some of the magistrates who were sitting there, and the regional co-ordinating magistrate, Magistrate Pauline Spencer, it has been observed that that experience is already evident: that people are more relaxed and able to present better in a sense – better before the court. There is a strong focus on cultural safety within the building –

Mathew HILAKARI: You picked up my next question.

Louise ANDERSON: reflecting the Bunurong people, but more broadly – so there were around 23 individual artworks, but also in the design, language and the wayfinding.

Mathew HILAKARI: Particularly I just want to pick up and emphasise the separate entrance points. It is really important, and I thought that was a really great thing to see established in the court. Culturally safe spaces, and particularly the entrance of light into cells, are really important. I just wanted to talk briefly on the workforce. What does it mean for workers and people working in the justice system in Melbourne's west?

Louise ANDERSON: Sure. Thank you. There was a formal closing of the Werribee court – a Werribee court which was very overcrowded and challenging.

Mathew HILAKARI: It was just two Magistrates' Courts.

Louise ANDERSON: Two magistrates and around 10 staff. So I know for those magistrates and staff, they feel very privileged to be working in the Wyndham Law Courts. There are now around 40 staff and magistrates and VCAT members, but importantly, those justice agencies I referred to are also really commenting on both the incredible quality of the asset. Thanks, Mr Hilakari.

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

Jade BENHAM: Thank you, Chair. Ms Anderson, why were there more than 11,000 criminal matters left unfinished last financial year?

Louise ANDERSON: Are you referring to pending matters in the Magistrates' Court? Most courts have a pending caseload because really no court can get to matters as soon as they are filed. There has been an increase in criminal initiations in the Magistrates' Court, but, as I think the Deputy Chair referred to before, there has also been an increase in bail applications.

Jade BENHAM: So are bail applications prioritised over criminal matters?

Louise ANDERSON: Bail applications take priority ordinarily because someone has been – often, as you would know, the police may have arrested them on the street. They are brought directly to the Magistrates' Court either online or in person, usually in person if it is a first remand, and there is a priority that they must be dealt with, because otherwise the nature of whether they are at liberty or not remains undecided. So yes, there has been increased demand on the Magistrates' Court to hear those matters.

Jade BENHAM: So how many victims are still awaiting resolution?

Louise ANDERSON: I do not know. There are different types of criminal matters that run through the Magistrates' Court, but I am not aware of the nature or the particulars of those matters that remain pending.

Jade BENHAM: So they are not statistics that we could –

Louise ANDERSON: I would not have them.

Jade BENHAM: You have almost already answered this, but out of those 11,000, do we know how many were family violence victims?

Louise ANDERSON: Family violence matters are also, understandably, a significant priority. If a person comes before the court seeking the protection of the court, it matters that interim family violence intervention orders or personal safety intervention orders are heard as a matter of priority. Those may be made for six or 12 months before a final hearing. I am confident that of those 11,000, there would be very few that would be within a family violence context, other than those matters awaiting final hearing. But the intervention orders would have been made, if there was reason to make them, providing the protection necessary.

Jade BENHAM: Okay. Just for reference, this is on the delays and scope changes in the specialist family courts and VCAT and refers to some of the responses on pages 15 and 16. The Royal Commission into Family Violence expected specialist family violence courts to be rolled out promptly, so why did the scope issues from 2022 take until mid-2025 to resolve at Broadmeadows and Geelong?

Louise ANDERSON: Thank you. It is an important question and one I also asked the team. We have implemented many family violence courts across the state. Some are new builds like Bendigo or Wyndham at greenfield sites, but many of them involve retrofitting very old buildings. Broadmeadows and Geelong have proved quite difficult. They are operating courts, and they are high-volume courts. We have had to ensure that the work is done to minimise the impact on those who are using the courts and on the magistrates. The work is now arranged around weekends, pre court and post court into the evenings. We have been endeavouring not to have a cost blowout, so that has meant that the time is extending. There were also some other issues, particularly in Broadmeadows and Geelong, where the first planning, once you started to apply the architectural drawings, did not necessarily work within the flow of the business and the current footprint, so there needed to be some amendments. It is not usual for us with the family violence courts. There is a pretty strong capability in court services, and ordinarily they are on time, so it is disappointing that they are not.

Jade BENHAM: Those issues were not foreseen beforehand?

Louise ANDERSON: They would have been foreseen in terms of needing to accommodate the work of the courts, but I think there was some optimism bias in there where perhaps there was a view that it would not have been so noisy or so invasive. For Broadmeadows, in particular, I know it was very difficult for sitting magistrates to properly hold their hearings with the works underway.

Jade BENHAM: How many victim-survivors were processed through the non-specialist courts at those locations during the three-year delay?

Louise ANDERSON: Of all family violence affected family members, 80 per cent are heard in specialist family violence courts – this is a global; I do not have the particulars for Geelong and Broadmeadows – and around 20 per cent still are heard through non-specialist facilities.

Jade BENHAM: Is that because of geography?

Louise ANDERSON: It is because of geography and because of not having them rolled out in every site across Victoria.

Jade BENHAM: Why was the VCAT digital transformation project not properly scoped at the outset, requiring a late scope reconfiguration and causing the funds to lapse?

Louise ANDERSON: Thank you. From what I know, and I know that project well, it was not a rescoping. Perhaps that is a misdescription –

Jade BENHAM: Scope reconfiguration.

Louise ANDERSON: There was quite a bit of work that needed to be done to accommodate the RDRV, which is Rental Dispute Resolution Victoria. That was not in VCAT's longer term plan when the VCAT transformation project was initiated, so there needed to be further changes to scope to look at accommodating that initiative.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Anderson. We will go to Ms Kathage.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you so much, Chair. And thank you very much for joining us. I would like to go back to family violence. I see on page 5 of the questionnaire it says that the case clearance rate for family violence intervention orders remains at 99 per cent for 2024–25. Is that correct?

Louise ANDERSON: Yes.

Lauren KATHAGE: And there is more information there about three brand new specialist family violence courts being operationalised. Can you tell us where they are and what they provide?

Louise ANDERSON: Yes. Thank you. That is at – I will just make sure. There have actually been four – but three in the period for the purpose of the questionnaire – so Dandenong, Latrobe, Sunshine and Ringwood. They have been completed, and what they provide – as I mentioned in response to the previous question, retrofitting some of the existing facilities presents some challenges. But first and foremost they need to provide a separate entrance so that there is safety for affected family members seeking the protection of the court. Then we move into a separate waiting area, so demarcation from the general registry and the capacity for us to use technology to provide remote witness support if necessary. The person may not wish to appear in the courtroom, and when they do appear in the courtroom, we endeavour to put in place in those courtrooms initiatives such as we have done in Bendigo and Wyndham where the affected family member can have the eye contact of the magistrate but not be seen by the court or the public. So there are mainly structural changes. Then of course the Magistrates' Court supports the operational model, which includes a number of services to both really strengthen the experience of safety and also look at referral and supports post court.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you. The types of supports – can you go into more detail on those?

Louise ANDERSON: Sure. Pre court there is an initiative called navigation and triage. That is mainly online or a phone call, where a person speaks to the affected family member, speaks to them about the court process, understands what their pressures might be, where the risk might sit, how they may be able to address the risk, whether it is appropriate for them to come to court or they may wish to attend through one of the remote facilities, the Orange Door. Then when and if they choose to come to court, there are support people, whether it is through Court Network or the individual supports offered by the Magistrates' Court. That will be informed by whether family violence is the most immediate and pressing risk or need, or there may be other issues around substance abuse, mental health concerns. So there is a capacity to wrap services around, either through the court integrated services provider, CISP, or indeed through specialist family violence supports. The person then may need support giving evidence in court. That does not mean enabling what they say but ensuring that they understand the process. Ordinarily their legal representative will do that, but sometimes the court support worker can also help. And then, as I mentioned, when leaving court there is not only the need for safety when they leave – particularly if an intervention order has been made, it can become a really high-risk time for affected family members – it is important that they know what their housing options are, what supports the police can give, and if they need to be at a safe place, those arrangements are made as well.

Lauren KATHAGE: I am glad you are going to the extra effort to, I guess, retrofit in Broadmeadows to make sure we can have the family violence service court there as well. I know with the delivery of the Orange Door by the government also in Broadmeadows it is great that we have got those different services working together for the Broadmeadows community. I know the local member is really pleased with that.

Louise ANDERSON: Thank you.

Lauren KATHAGE: In your presentation you had quite an amazing number up there for Rental Dispute Resolution Victoria. I think you said it has already been – was it 5000?

Louise ANDERSON: Five thousand.

Lauren KATHAGE: Five thousand matters. How is that impacting VCAT backlogs?

Louise ANDERSON: Thank you. As you would be aware, the RDRV – if I can call it that so I do not get too tongue-tied – focuses on disputes between renters and residential rental providers for bond, for compensation, for repairs and for rental increases. Anything else that falls outside of that goes to the general residential tenancies list, which are matters that are still heard before a member of the tribunal. It is a free service. It offers, first of all, an online service. It may be that matters can be resolved online by some

negotiation of one of the 46 conference mediators – I think they are called resolution or conciliation officers. If the matter does not resolve online, then there is an in-person attendance and again a discussion between the rental provider and the renter as to what the nature of the dispute is and how they can resolve it, not dissimilar to how industry ombudsmen sometimes operate, really looking at quick, timely, free dispute resolution so people can get on with their lives. It has resolved, as I said – I will just make sure my notes are correct – over 5000. The average is taking around 25 days. There are some that move through to being resolved by a member, and they take 66 days.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Anderson. Mr Welch.

Richard WELCH: Thank you, Chair. In the CSV deck you talk about 47 projects that were critical to complete, otherwise you would have had serious disruption or risk of closure. How many venues would have faced disruption or closure if the 47 critical projects had not been funded?

Louise ANDERSON: Sorry, Mr Welch. Would you just help me there and refer to where you are?

Richard WELCH: Sorry, I fumbled my words very badly.

Louise ANDERSON: No, that is okay.

Richard WELCH: There were 47 critical asset maintenance projects to mitigate the risk of closure or major service delivery. How many of those were funded, and how many are completed?

Louise ANDERSON: Thank you. Court Services Victoria, unlike other departments, does not get access to depreciation funding as a matter of course. We must apply each year. We get around – and it will be in the public record – about \$5 million per year for what we might call highly critical –

Richard WELCH: I would just like to narrow down to –

Louise ANDERSON: Sorry.

Richard WELCH: I have only got 6 minutes.

Louise ANDERSON: I know. I was just trying to give you some context, because you were asking about funding. We have funding for some, and we prioritise where that new funding –

Richard WELCH: Are those 47 complete?

Louise ANDERSON: Out of that, the works have been done to support the ongoing operations of those courts, yes. Whether all the works are finished, I would have to come back to you on notice on that, Mr Welch.

Richard WELCH: Of your 78 properties, are there now additional ones requiring critical works?

Louise ANDERSON: Yes.

Richard WELCH: How many?

Louise ANDERSON: At the moment we are looking at five for works as a matter of priority before the end of December, and then we are working through site assessments for next year.

Richard WELCH: That is in addition to the 47. Would you be able to provide us a list of the projects, their time, cost and duration?

Louise ANDERSON: I can absolutely take that on notice.

Richard WELCH: Thank you. Within the questionnaire you had the opportunity to list five underperforming programs or 'haven't met expectations' or any variation of those words. You have declined the opportunity to provide those. We are a bit surprised at that. Is it that you chose not to or you have none that are underperforming?

Louise ANDERSON: We would fill in every part of the questionnaire that CSV was required to complete. There are some questions where we are exempt. If that is one, that would be why, Mr Welch.

Richard WELCH: You did complete it last year.

Louise ANDERSON: We did?

Richard WELCH: Yes.

Louise ANDERSON: Gosh, you have thrown me a little bit there. I will have to have a look. I am happy to come back to you on that.

Richard WELCH: Because it would be very hard to understand that you do not have any that are underperforming given that you have got case loads of 11,000 carried forward and clearance rates have dropped to 92 per cent. Is that something you would like to re-examine and present?

Louise ANDERSON: Could you just refer me to the question that we are looking for? I am sorry, Mr Welch.

Richard WELCH: It is question 2b).

Louise ANDERSON: Question 2b). I am eating into your 6 minutes, so I am very sorry. I can take that on notice, Mr Welch.

Richard WELCH: You will be happy to complete that?

Louise ANDERSON: Sure.

Richard WELCH: Great. That is wonderful. Thank you very much. I was not expecting you to be so amicable about it.

Louise ANDERSON: Well, of course. We have got an obligation to be transparent.

Richard WELCH: That is very good. Not all departments are like you. We have a couple of questions about the court fund. Way back in 2007 VAGO found that the court fund imposed an administrative burden on magistrates and senior registrars, up to a full day each week. How much time did it take in 2024–25 to manage that?

Louise ANDERSON: I am going to say I am feeling like I am letting you down, Mr Welch. I am not sure of that one. In terms of the court fund, that is a program sitting within the Magistrates' Court where the magistrates administer it. I presume that is relating to where there are certain fines or fees that are held by the Magistrates' Court, and –

Richard WELCH: And it goes towards charity?

Louise ANDERSON: Yes, and it goes to charities. As I understand it, it has been really streamlined, so it is managed principally administratively with a magistrate signing off finally on the grants.

Richard WELCH: Do you know the amount of time that is being spent on it?

Louise ANDERSON: I do not, but again I can ask. Whether or not I will have a –

Richard WELCH: Could you? It is a relative figure for us, because obviously with delays in the courts we want them spending less time on that and more time on clearing cases, so we would like to know.

Louise ANDERSON: Yes. Thank you.

Richard WELCH: Oh my god. Any questions?

Jade BENHAM: Well, one follow-up to that: how many people are in prison for longer than they need to be because of the court fund administration burden that magistrates are facing?

Louise ANDERSON: I think as I said, I am not really familiar with it, Ms Benham, so I will come back.

Jade BENHAM: Thank you.

Louise ANDERSON: Thank you.

Jade BENHAM: Thanks, Chair – under time.

Lauren KATHAGE: Page 6 of the questionnaire states ‘In 2024–25, CSV completed 47 individual critical asset maintenance projects’: they are all completed?

Louise ANDERSON: Yes.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

Richard WELCH: We still have the time cost and scope question that is on notice.

The CHAIR: If you do not have any more questions, we are moving on. We are going to go to Mr Tak.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you, Chair. Thank you for your presentation. Could you talk to us about digital innovations that are occurring across the court group and why these innovations are important for people’s access to justice systems? I refer to page 5 of the questionnaire.

Louise ANDERSON: Thank you, Mr Tak. As I mentioned in my presentation, reliable and integrated and up-to-the minute technology is core to the work of the Victorian courts and the tribunal. Some of that relates to the underlying system, the case management system. But in terms of digital innovation, we are upgrading the audiovisual to support greater reliability of technology for online courts. We are also rolling out upgrades to electronic courts. E-court is where there may be a smaller courtroom where a judicial officer and support staff may sit, but principally it is where the parties all come in online and through videoconferencing. We have got a number of increased e-courtrooms in the County Court, and the Supreme Court has been running with integrated electronic technology to facilitate those kinds of hearings since 2017.

There are initiatives in all of the courts that look to how people can file online to reduce time and effort and how those filings are then integrated into the case management system. From there they may wish to appear online if the judicial officer thinks it is the appropriate case for them to do so. There is also ability, particularly through the magistrates service centre, to be supported either through calls or again through email exchange or discussion via website to give people information on how to prepare for court, what is expected from them and what they can expect to experience. There are a number of other initiatives which go to electronic subpoena management, supporting greater accessibility to electronic files, which supports both remote access but also flexibility and agility within the court environment. Subpoenas are very document-heavy and data-heavy, so to be able to move those online, as the County Court has, has really started to free up very practical things like space. I do not know if you have ever been involved in a subpoena or discovery process, but often it results in volumes and volumes of paper, so to move that to electronic means that there are less people having to manage the movement of paper. I am looking forward very much for that to be in place in the Magistrates’ Court through the case management system. I will stop there. I am so sorry, I could keep going, Mr Tak, but I thought you might have another question if you wished.

Meng Heang TAK: Moving on, thank you – we might come back to the digital innovation.

Could you tell us a little bit more about Koori Court and how it works, also referring to page 5 of the questionnaire saying that it delivers culturally appropriate sentencing outcomes that help to reduce reoffending. Could you also provide some examples for that?

Louise ANDERSON: Sure. Of course. Koori Court has been 25 years in the Magistrates’ Court. It was an initiative of the Aboriginal justice agreement, and the first court was in Shepparton. The Koori Court sits now in the Children’s Court, the County Court and the Magistrates’ Court. It is principally what we call a sentencing court. For a person to be eligible, they first of all need to plead guilty – and guilty to a certain offence. Some cannot be heard in the Koori Court, like family violence; that is still treated in the other criminal stream. Once a

person has decided and has pleaded guilty, the Koori Courts themselves are really imbued with strong cultural safety. The design of the court is much lower, the magistrate leaves the bench and sits at a round or oval table, and the table is ordinarily designed with very compelling art from First Nations. All of that is one as an aesthetic, but much more importantly, it goes to cultural safety and support. There are two main elders or respected persons who also sit at that table, and there will be the prosecutor and the defence. There will be a discussion with the accused, with the person who has pleaded guilty, about the nature of their offending, the impact of their offending on the community and what needs to be put in place to help them not offend again. There will be a lot of discussion. There will be a strong focus on cultural law, cultural supports, the community and how strong that person's community is. If they were to not have a custodial sentence imposed on them and they were to go back into their community, how might the magistrate feel confident that there would be a low chance of them reoffending? It is a very important exchange that occurs over a few hours. Then ultimately the magistrate makes the decision and imposes the sentence but is informed by the elders and respected persons as to what might be the appropriate sentence to make.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you. That is all from me, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Tak. We are going to go straight to Mr Puglielli.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon. Can I ask: since the March 2025 bail reforms were introduced, have additional judicial officers, registrars and support staff been hired across the justice courts in response to the increased remand workload?

Louise ANDERSON: The courts received funding for one additional Supreme Court judge and staff, including registry staff; seven additional magistrates; and two additional Children's Court magistrates with support staff. We received funding to make capital works changes, particularly to secure docks, which is the holding area in the courtroom for where an accused person may sit securely and safely, and for three Koori-identified positions to support multijurisdictionally a Koori accused to navigate the bail system. We are in the process of recruiting for all. As you would know, the bail reform came in two tranches, and the funding was made available but not yet in time to have the judiciary appointed or the staff appointed.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: For the staff you were talking about just before, can you provide the committee with a more exhaustive list, even on notice if possible?

Louise ANDERSON: Sure. Yes, of course.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. Can I ask: to what extent are the justice courts having to increase after-hours and weekend court sittings for bail?

Louise ANDERSON: The Children's Court initiated an online weekend bail remand court I think almost two years ago now; they have had further funding to sustain that. They hear matters over the weekend, each weekend, and that has become part of their core operating model. The Magistrates' Court has had the out-of-hours bail and remand court for many years, and that also continues to be funded. That sits sometimes seven days a week in the evenings outside of ordinary court time.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. For staff working in some of those instances, is that considered overtime for those staff members?

Louise ANDERSON: Yes, it is.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Are you able to provide the committee, for the budget period, with the total number of overtime hours worked for the justice courts?

Louise ANDERSON: I will take that on notice. I am not sure if our records are as accessible as they ought be, but I will take it on notice.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. And if you are looking for that, it would be good to compare that to the previous budget period if that is possible. Thank you. And in line with those overtime hours, what would those costs represent to the justice courts – potentially on notice also?

Louise ANDERSON: Yes.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. I will move on to another question. Can you tell us: have additional bail-only lists or sittings been created for the justice courts to cope with demand following these changes?

Louise ANDERSON: I think as I mentioned, the Magistrates' Court have initiated the centralised and online remand court, which is a very particular initiative to support bail and the work associated with bail. More incidentally but still importantly, matters relating to bail are heard in the intensive case management list in the Magistrates' Court, which I also spoke to. In terms of the Children's Court or the Supreme Court, the Supreme Court, as you would know, holds an inherent jurisdiction, and it has had an increase in bail applications where people, fresh from the Magistrates' Court, are seeking to have their bail findings reviewed, but again that comes within the general operations of those courts.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. Can you tell the committee what proportion of bail applications for the budget period were unrepresented?

Louise ANDERSON: I do not have that data, and I am not sure it will be readily available. Again, I can take it on notice.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. That is much appreciated, and it would be good to know if that has changed since the introduction of these reforms. Is it the case that more matters for the justice courts are now being adjourned part heard because time is being taken up with bail issues?

Louise ANDERSON: I do not think the evidence supports that assumption. There are some matters that are not getting listed as quickly as they may have because of demand and pressure, but there is no evidence to suggest that it is resulting in further or more adjournments. When a matter comes before a magistrate or a judicial officer that matter should be ready for hearing, and they will proceed with it. Adjournments would relate to different matters, not necessarily about court time.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. Are you able to provide the committee with the number of matters, for the budget period, for the justice courts that were adjourned part heard?

Louise ANDERSON: Again, that is not data that court services holds; that is data that the court holds, and I can inquire about it if I may. I will take the question on notice, but I may not be in a position to respond.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Can you tell the committee which court specifically was most affected by the changes to bail?

Louise ANDERSON: The Magistrates' Court – the demand there, as I have mentioned, is not insignificant, and that is clear in their annual report. They have had an increase, as have the Children's Court, but the numbers in the Magistrates' Court sit in the tens of thousands.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. Can you confirm: is AI being used in the justice courts?

Louise ANDERSON: AI is not being used. There are some concepts being considered in the Coroners Court but not being used.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. We will go to Mr Galea.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon, Ms Anderson and Mr Benns. Thanks for joining us. Ms Anderson, I would like to ask about something that is referenced a few times throughout the questionnaire, which is the courts case management system. Can you please talk to me about how the CMS rollout has been going over the past 12 months and what you seek to achieve from it?

Louise ANDERSON: Thanks very much for your question. The case management system is for the Magistrates' Court and the Children's Court. It is a criminal, civil and child protection system that has already, as I mentioned in my opening, gone live with child protection and civil. The focus in the last financial year has been very much on the criminal release. There has been considerable work done on, one, the court's operational readiness to start working with a modern, integrated case management system that will drive performance but will also really change the reliance on paper files.

The focus has also been very much on what we call interfaces, or the intersection between the work of Victoria Police, VicRoads, Legal Aid and others, where ordinarily they would have been expected to file paper documents, whether charges or initiations. Now they will be facilitated to do that via an online portal. That has been very important to ensure that the system is fast, responsive and understands the nature of their work so that it is able to be done both in real time and with a high level of accuracy. There has been a considerable amount of work ensuring that the order process is both efficient but also accurate, because that is a critical part of the Magistrates' Court. Interestingly it is a US-based system, but the company setting it up has set up an Australasian presence, which is helpful. One of the pieces of feedback we received was, of all the work they have done around the globe, there is no court like the Magistrates' Court, where the magistrates actually enter the orders in court. It is an incredible efficiency and a really significant and important role for the magistrates. So we needed to make sure this system could do that and not draw down too much time. We are now well on track. The build is complete for crime, and we are now on track for a go-live in early 2026.

Michael GALEA: So that will make efficiencies obviously on the court side but also hopefully the VicPol side to support them.

Louise ANDERSON: Absolutely. Yes.

Michael GALEA: Terrific. Thank you. Question 18 of the questionnaire goes through spend on contractors and consultants. I have seen over the three years there is quite a significant tapering down of expenditure on both of them. It has been cited that you have gained economies of scale but also new in-house capabilities in lieu of that spending. Can you talk to me a little bit more about what those are?

Louise ANDERSON: Absolutely. Some of that is a reduction in – and thank you to Ms Kathage for calling out that the 47 projects had been completed. In those, we would sometimes need consultants or contractors to do some of that work. Some of the reduction is absolutely lined up with the cessation of capital projects, because that comes in peaks and troughs, depending on the funding we have and the nature of the work we need to do. The more enduring aspects of it are where we have pulled together across the courts, understanding that there is no need for multiple consultants doing the same work – if it is important and priority work, let us do it together – but also really driving the value in our contracts. And while it has not necessarily been smooth sailing with all of the interpreters who appear before courts – one example of that is we changed our interpreters contract to ensure that the service is lined up with what the magistrate needs – we are making the best use of what is such a critical access-to-justice initiative but also reducing our cost. Other than that, as government and as my Courts Council expect us to do, we are relying on our own internal capability and not engaging consultants.

Michael GALEA: Thank you very much. On the 'Supporting victims of crime' output – this is page 2 of the questionnaire – can you talk to me a little bit more about the training that you have outlined in this output measure?

Louise ANDERSON: Thank you. I think, as the questionnaire notes, it sits predominantly with the judicial college. The judicial college has around 160 judicial officers, who have undergone training to understand more trauma-informed practice and understand again that notion of court craft, where a judicial officer has control of their courtroom. The way that they enable underpins some of the cross-examination, and some of the evidence-in-chief can be really informed by good training and understanding of trauma-informed practices. 160 judicial officers have gained benefit from that, and it is reflected also in one of the college's publications, the bench book. So it is important, and a lot of that sits with the Magistrates' Court, but not only – particularly the County Court, because of the high number of sexual offences that run through there.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. Mr Tak asked you about the Koori Court just before. I would like to ask you about one of your program outcomes, which is embedding cultural safety and self-determination for First Peoples, which is, I can see, quite a significant investment in this space. Can you tell me, beyond the measures specific to the Koori Court, what else has been achieved in this area?

Louise ANDERSON: Absolutely. All the judiciary are open and, with the judicial college, attend cultural immersion, understanding and hearing from First Nations people. Thank you.

Michael GALEA: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Anderson.

Louise ANDERSON: Thanks for your questions. Six minutes go very quickly.

The CHAIR: It sure does. Ms Anderson and Mr Benns, thank you very much for appearing before the committee this afternoon. The committee is going to follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing, and responses are required within five working days of receiving the committee's request. I would also like to thank today all secretaries and officials who have given evidence to the committee, as well as Hansard, the secretariat and parliamentary attendants. I want to thank the hospitality, security and cleaning staff who have also looked after all of us today.

The committee will resume its consideration of the 2024–25 financial and performance outcomes on 26 November at 9:30 am.

I declare this hearing adjourned.

Committee adjourned.