

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2022-23 Budget Estimates

Melbourne—Wednesday, 18 May 2022

MEMBERS

Ms Lizzie Blandthorn—Chair

Mr Danny O'Brien—Deputy Chair

Mr Rodney Barton

Mr Sam Hibbins

Mr Gary Maas

Mrs Beverley McArthur

Mr James Newbury

Ms Pauline Richards

Mr Tim Richardson

Ms Nina Taylor

WITNESSES

Ms Jaelyn Symes MLC, Minister for Emergency Services,

Ms Rebecca Falkingham, Secretary,

Ms Peta McCammon, Associate Secretary,

Mr Andrew Crisp, Commissioner, Emergency Management Victoria, and

Ms Kate Fitzgerald, Deputy Secretary and Chief Executive, Emergency Management Victoria, Department of Justice and Community Safety.

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

I ask that mobile telephones please be turned to silent.

I begin by acknowledging the traditional Aboriginal owners of the land on which we are meeting. We pay our respects to them, their elders past, present and emerging as well as elders from other communities who may be with us today.

On behalf of the Parliament, the committee is conducting this Inquiry into the 2022–23 Budget Estimates. The committee's aim is to scrutinise public administration and finance to improve outcomes for the Victorian community.

I advise that all evidence taken by the committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. However, comments repeated outside this hearing may not be protected by this privilege.

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

We welcome the Minister for Emergency Services, officers of the department and the Emergency Management Commissioner. Thank you for joining us today. We invite you to make an opening statement, and this will be followed by questions from the committee.

Ms SYMES: Thank you, Chair. And again, thank you, members. This is my first PAEC as the Minister for Emergency Services, a really exciting portfolio, so I look forward to having a conversation with you about it. Of course I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners and paying my respects to elders past, present and emerging. I will move to a short presentation.

Visual presentation.

Ms SYMES: Of course—particularly the regional MPs of the group—we all have had significant experience with our emergency services sector, and since becoming minister for this portfolio in August last year I have certainly had the great pleasure of meeting and working with many more of our dedicated and extremely hardworking emergency services workers and volunteers than I did just in my role as a Member for Northern Victoria. Whether it is seeing our volunteer firefighters at the CFA VFBV state championships in Mooropna, seeing our SES volunteers in Essendon after the storms in November or seeing the FRV's swiftwater rescue team off at Melbourne Airport earlier this year to provide support to New South Wales and Queensland, or indeed plugging in with the ESTA call takers at Burwood, it is undeniable that the commitment of our frontline workers shows the Victorian community that all hours of the day they are there for them. They are quite frankly awesome people, and it has been an honour to see many of them in action.

It is also why I am so pleased to talk to the significant additional investment of over \$442 million in Victoria's emergency services through the Victorian budget this year. We are continuing to back our hardworking emergency services with the support they need to do what they do best: protect and save lives. We are delivering more staff, more resources and better infrastructure, attracting more people to begin a rewarding experience in our emergency services.

In support for ESTA, this budget makes a significant investment, and our ESTA workforce has been the centre of this investment. Right around the nation demand for frontline health services continues at an all-time high, and our 000 call takers and dispatchers have not been immune to these challenges. Since the start of the pandemic 000 ambulance calls have increased by approximately a third, from a daily average of about 2200 calls in October 2020 to almost 4000 calls a day in December–January. This is unprecedented demand, but it is becoming the new normal. When they call for an ambulance I want every Victorian to have the confidence that there will be help on the other end of the line and someone to see them at the hospital when they arrive. That is why this year's budget invests in practical and immediate measures to continue to build ESTA's capability, respond to this demand and get Victorians the help they need at critical moments.

The \$333 million funding package includes funding previously announced in March 2020, coupled with more than \$27 million in funding provided in October. The total investment by the Victorian government was \$360.9 million funding in last year's budget. This is the biggest ever investment in Victoria's 000 capability. The package will add nearly 400 staff to increase 000 services for ambulance, police and fire, an investment of more than \$170 million. It will continue to drive the recruitment already underway for call takers and dispatchers, boosting these numbers to an additional 141.8 FTE, including 67 for ambulance, 60.5 for police and 14.3 for fire. The investment also adds an additional 260 FTE in other staff to support ESTA's call takers and dispatchers, including team leaders, trainers, critical incident managers, corporate services and the staffing for immediate initiatives to build capacity in 2022–23.

It also includes short-term resources to continue to drive immediate improvements to address pandemic demands in the short term. This significant funding boost adds to measures already underway to deliver more call takers and dispatchers, more trainers and team leaders, build better support and surge capacity for the busy times and, importantly, providing wellbeing support to look after our hardworking frontline staff. As a result of this investment we are already seeing real improvements to call-taker performance to deal with ongoing high levels of demand that we are continuing to see across Victoria. We are also providing \$26 million for immediate measures, including wellbeing support. As I have mentioned, it cannot be understated, the importance of ensuring that our workforce are supported. There is a similar amount of funding also provided for IT and security systems to support ESTA to upgrade its operations.

This budget also includes a number of critically important allocations across the emergency services sector. There is more than \$27 million in additional funding to support fire services, including to build female-friendly changing facilities at three training campuses, upgrades at 40 CFA stations and further to support PFAS assessments and decontamination of high-risk stations and appliances. The Victorian government will continue to upskill and protect our volunteer firefighters through additional driver training as well as an upgraded emergency services fleet. Volunteers at VICSES will also receive almost \$20 million to maintain facilities, upgrade priority vehicles and help volunteers respond to floods, storms and other emergencies. This funding will also support the government's ongoing work to improve the culture and safety of emergency service volunteer groups and encourage more women to join their local units.

Just some further key initiatives in my final slide, we do want to continue to invest in water safety with critical search-and-rescue capabilities in coastal and inland waterways. This will be boosted by nearly \$3 million for Marine Search and Rescue to refurbish its fleet, buy more digital radios and help them work with other emergency volunteer agencies on water safety responses. Volunteers at Life Saving Victoria will receive \$11.9 million for a range of programs, including to continue valuable water safety programs at public pools. The funding will also go towards the redevelopment of the Sorrento Surf Life Saving Club and all-abilities infrastructure for the Seaford Life Saving Club.

The Victorian government is also investing \$36.2 million over four years to keep the State Control Centre running 24/7 to meet increased demand. I had the pleasure of visiting the State Control Centre and talking to personnel with Commissioner Crisp yesterday—an amazing facility that has the ability to house representatives from all of our agencies. Having the support for the 50 people that work there as direct employees of the State Control Centre and facilitating the ability for them to monitor and provide information 24/7, 365 days a year—you talk about numbers and investment, but when you actually go and talk to the people that are doing this job, you really can see firsthand how important it is to support them and the important work they do in keeping Victorians safe.

There is more than \$2 million also provided for workers at Emergency Management Victoria to design, coordinate, implement and report on critical sector-wide reforms which will strengthen emergency management leadership and do great work in continuing to help communities that are faced with emergencies. We are continuing to back our hardworking emergency services with the support they need to do what they do best—that is, protect and save lives. I look forward to discussing these commitments in more detail with the members, because I know that you all very much share my admiration for our emergency services personnel in your own communities.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Minister. Mr O'Brien.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Minister. Can I also begin by acknowledging our volunteers, particularly this National Volunteer Week. Today is Wear Orange Wednesday. I do not actually own anything orange, I am afraid, Minister, otherwise I would be, but—

Ms SYMES: I am going to have to send out a month's notice next time so people can, like, hit the shops.

Mr D O'BRIEN: I particularly pay tribute to our SES volunteers and also, from our perspective, support our CFA volunteers, who deserve true independence, which comes to my first question, Minister. Regarding the fire services reform, the performance measures on budget paper 3, page 290, show that we are falling short—FRV and CFA—on a number of the performance measures: structural fire confined to room of origin, emergency response times for road accident response, emergency response times for structural fires. How is this justified given that the cost of operations has gone through the roof? It is heading towards \$895 million at the end of the forward investments, up from \$625 million when you came into government. We are paying more money as Victorians through the fire services levy and under the FRV reforms we are actually getting worse service.

Ms SYMES: Thank you, Mr O'Brien, for your question. I certainly will not make apologies for making expansive investments in our fire services. I do share your sentiment in relation to the great work that our career and volunteer firefighters do for the state of Victoria. As you have referred to data and fire response times, it is an opportunity to inform the committee that, as part of our government's commitment to greater transparency, response time data for both FRV and CFA are now publicly reported quarterly. The publication of this—

Mr D O'BRIEN: Nine months of data went missing, Minister. We waited nine months for that data to be updated.

Ms SYMES: It is coming. The publication of the response times—I have not received it yet; I am not sitting on it or anything—is something that will be available as soon as possible. But it is important that we have these responses times out. It provides Victorians with more information about how fire services are working to meet their needs. Both agencies measure their performance against the service delivery standard, which are a measure of the time taken for the first truck to arrive. Over the last year response times have been impacted due to additional COVID measures that were introduced to protect the community and also our firefighters. FRV required additional PPE to be worn, while CFA introduced temperature testing for all volunteers prior to turning out. Despite these measures our fire service agencies did continue to deliver exceptional response times to Victorians in both quarters that were released. In quarter 4 the CFA responded to 80.6 per cent of emergency incidents within delivery standards, while FRV responded to 86.9 per cent of code 1 incidents within service delivery standards. Whilst you have identified, and I certainly acknowledge, that this is below the 90 per cent benchmark, FRV's response to emergency medical response incidents did exceed current targets—they attended 94.4 per cent of EMR calls within standards. Obviously impacts of COVID have been significant, and I know the CFA and FRV are looking closely at the data to ensure that response times can be improved.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Okay.

Ms SYMES: In relation to the release of quarter 1 and quarter 2, they are still finalising the data. It has been delayed due to some technical issues, but, as I said, it will be released in line with our government's commitment to transparency. A similar issue did affect the release of the previous quarters from last year, but both sets have been released. That is the intention here, and we do continue to return to a quarterly publishing regime in the near future as soon as this issue is resolved.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Minister, I note that I think that is what you said last time, 'It was technical'. You cannot say 'We're releasing data quarterly' when we have not seen anything since April–June last year and we are now into May. Very quickly, can I perhaps ask the Commissioner: where is the delay? Is it with you? Is it with Ken Block? What is the hold-up?

Comm. CRISP: In relation to the data itself?

Mr D O'BRIEN: Yes.

Comm. CRISP: With the organisation itself, with the agency—it has certainly not been held up at EMV.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Sorry, FRV and CFA?

Comm. CRISP: The data, yes.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Okay. And when are we going to see it?

Ms SYMES: You will see it as soon as it is available and as soon as it comes to me. I am told it is being finalised.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Right. Okay.

Ms SYMES: It would have been nice to have it today, I appreciate that, but we do not.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Thank you. It would be nice to have it today. It would be nice to have it out.

Ms SYMES: How about I commit to take it on notice and provide it to the committee at the earliest opportunity?

Mr D O'BRIEN: That would be wonderful, but presumably you would provide it to the public as well.

Ms SYMES: Of course.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Deputy Chair. Mr Maas.

Mr MAAS: Thank you, Chair, thank you, Minister, and thank you, everyone, for your attendance. Minister, if I could take you to the 'Output initiatives' that are in budget paper 3 at page 89. It details there across the forward estimates \$333 million in funding for ESTA. Would you be able to explain for the committee how that funding will improve ESTA's performance?

Ms SYMES: Yes. Thanks, Mr Maas. As I went to in my presentation, this is really important funding for a really important agency who are really at the front line of the front line of our emergency services response. We know that due to pandemic pressures and the impacts on the health system, emergency responses across the world have been significantly impacted, and ESTA is certainly no exception. The 2022–23 budget invests a total of \$333 million to support ESTA to provide improved service delivery and meet demand pressures, particularly in relation to call takers and call dispatching. This will deliver an additional 400 new staff and increase 000 services for ambulance, police and fire. And, as I indicated, this is the biggest ever investment into 000 capacity.

The funding boost is going to bring on more trainers and team leaders, build much better support for surge capacity for busy times and provide further wellbeing support to look after these hardworking staff. It includes funding for 141 call takers and dispatchers—67 ambulance call takers and dispatchers, 60.5 police call takers and just over 14 call takers in the fire area. It also includes 100 team leaders and trainers as well as a number of additional corporate and supervisor positions, centre managers and incident responder positions and trainers. The funding will also resource improvements to the computer-aided dispatch system, which is effectively the system that call takers use to identify people's location and ensure that the right response is provided. Additional support resources will also enhance mental health and wellbeing monitoring and education and cover accommodation overhead costs that will be required to support the uplift in the workforce. This includes the immediate support package that I announced in March, and so we have not waited for this budget to invest in ESTA; we are seeing improvements because of the consistent response from this government to the

challenges there. There were 43 additional new staff in last year's budget and \$28 million in October to ensure that as many call takers as possible were available within that envelope, and they are all on deck now.

I also want to take the opportunity to inform the committee how amazing this workforce is. The commitment of the people at ESTA to support Victorians just cannot be underestimated. It is one of my favourite places to visit. They have been under extreme pressure, and we have not shied away from the problems. But as I say to families who may have experienced delays in the system, both I and the government and departments and the workforce are just completely motivated to deliver improvements. I do not want anyone waiting online for an ambulance in particular. We have a benchmark of 90 per cent of calls being answered in 5 seconds, and we were meeting that pre pandemic. We have a dedicated refreshed management team that is supporting these amazing workers, and with the funding provided by government we are really on our way to making sure that we help this workforce tackle the challenges that have been inflicted on them. There is also a really great relationship between ESTA and AV and the industrial partners, which is just so important because this is a hub for emergency response, so the relationship with our other agencies is really important. Continued effort is required to progress improvements here, but it is positive, and we remain committed to delivering a 000 system that Victorians can rely on.

Mr MAAS: Terrific. Thanks very much, Minister. With about 30 seconds to go I think I might just leave it there.

Ms SYMES: Yes. Thank you, Mr Maas. Appreciate it.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Maas. Mr Barton.

Mr BARTON: Thank you, Chair. Minister, over the past few years the volunteer marine search and rescue sector has started to move to a new model based on the New South Wales marine rescue model. The sector supports the integration between the independent units and the coastguard. Minister, the sector is concerned that the current funding model is limited in bringing the sector together. What can you tell this vital sector that helps keep Victoria's boating community safe about the budget allocation? And how does it compare to other states such as New South Wales?

Ms SYMES: Thank you, Mr Barton, for drawing the committee's attention to Victoria's Marine Search and Rescue service, a really valued part of our emergency services family that provides a great service to many people who love to do things in water. They are a vital agency, and that is why in this budget we have provided \$3 million for equipment and vessels. We want our personnel to have better vessels to respond to emergencies, so there is \$1.06 million of output funding over four years for their vessel fleet maintenance program. It will make it easier for MSAR to work with partners in water safety, with new communications equipment also being supported by over \$100 000 in funding over four years, and there is almost \$40 000 ongoing and \$1.3 million to connect Marine Search and Rescue units to the radio network, which obviously is a very important part of being able to communicate, when you are out on the water, with people on land. This will see 24 base radios, 47 mobile radios and 90 portable radios. We certainly know that investing in these services is one way of getting good outcomes but also attracting people to come and volunteer, and this, combined with our ongoing funding for LSV and police—we know that in conjunction with MSAR support Victorians will be safer around water.

You referenced other states and funding models and the like, and I did want to reflect on the Better Boating Fund. That is not administered by me but obviously does have a role to play in relation to boat safety and facilities. This includes an allocation for water safety initiatives, and Emergency Management Victoria does work with the Department of Transport to allocate the funds based on risk and operational needs. I am advised that MSAR receives \$1.9 million annually from the Better Boating Fund, which supports operating costs, insurance and statewide training across all 28 volunteer units, and it is important to note that these organisations have access to our volunteer equipment program as well. But it is an area that I am less familiar with than other agencies, and I reckon that the Commissioner might want to supplement some of the words that I have provided, if that is okay.

Comm. CRISP: Thanks very much, Minister. And thanks, Mr Barton, for asking that question, because the marine search and rescue sector are sort of the quiet achievers. They go about their job, and it is not as visible what they are doing, obviously, because it can be a long way out to sea. So you are probably aware that we

have got 28 units across the state, made up of coastguard, LSV, independents and one SES unit. I was actually down in Warrnambool only on the weekend, where MSAR came together from Warrnambool, from Portland and from Port Fairy. We have been running these regional forums over the last six weeks. They actually listen to what our volunteers are saying. You are right in relation to New South Wales—it is a very different model. Queensland have gone through a recent review, and they are yet to announce what their model will look like. We are going to start doing some further work. We have got a conference coming up in July where we want to elicit advice, ideas, from the sector as a whole, about where we should go in the future with regard to marine search and rescue here in Victoria.

Mr BARTON: Thank you, Commissioner. Attorney—I have got 45 seconds—I note today is Wear Orange Wednesday—just saying—

Ms SYMES: I see.

Mr BARTON: and it recognises the fantastic work of our SES volunteers. That is why it is very apt that I ask this question today, because money has been allocated in the budget for maintenance and replacement of vehicles, but I am particularly interested in: can you expand on the replacement process for heavy rescue vehicles?

Ms SYMES: Yes, I can, and thank you for acknowledging Wear Orange Wednesday in recognition of the amazing work that our SES volunteers do and also hopefully encouraging more people to consider taking up a role with them. The budget provides \$8.925 million in assets funding for an additional 21 heavy rescue trucks and nine medium rescue trucks so that they can be well prepared and supported to respond to the more than 1200 road crash rescue incidents annually, and it is really great to have a decent budget for SES in relation to equipment and facilities in this budget. I know that they are particularly grateful, but I am more than happy to be able to provide government support for this amazing organisation.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Richards.

Ms RICHARDS: Thank you again, Minister and your officials, for the time you have with us this morning and also for the work you are doing. I would like to explore response and recovery as well and particularly refer you to budget paper 3, page 89. Can you please expand for the committee's benefit on how the funding of the State Control Centre workforce will help improve emergency service response and community recovery from disasters in Victoria?

Ms SYMES: Yes. Thank you, Ms Richards. This is a great opportunity to again reflect on my visit yesterday to the—it was yesterday, was it? Monday—to the State Control Centre. It is Victoria's primary control centre for the coordination of emergencies. It is the hub of a network of eight regional control centres and 42 incident control centres that are all around the state. As I said, I visited and talked to the amazing staff about the really important work that they do as well as the funding that we have allocated in this year's budget, because the outcome of the \$36.2 million will mean that we can keep this State Control Centre running 24/7 to meet increasing demand and ensure that our state is best positioned to respond to emergencies at a moment's notice, no matter what time of day.

Unsurprisingly, since it was established in 2009 the scope of responsibilities for this control centre, under the management of Emergency Management Victoria, has changed considerably. It has assumed coordination of emergencies beyond fire, storm and flood events to all hazards with all agencies. It is coordinating emergency service deployments to other states or other countries when we step in and provide assistance in that regard. It coordinates more public information and warnings, and we know that this is a really important part of what it does. We know that people that are faced with an emergency situation in their community really rely on timely and accurate information coming from our experts. The centre also has a relief and recovery role as a legislative responsibility of EMV. It is unsurprising as well that due to increased impacts of climate change the State Control Centre is activated more frequently and for longer periods.

An added benefit of the expanded remit of the State Control Centre is that over time it will be placed as a focal point to protect Victorians regardless of what is going on, and we are ensuring that the skills and expertise can be harnessed and maintained and become a permanent fixture rather than just responding to those big events. They are prepared to deal with so many emergencies, including human health pandemics and plant- or animal-related biosecurity events such as avian influenza, which I think I spoke to you about in my ag portfolio once.

But there are also impacts on critical infrastructure and being prepared for incidents such as cyber attacks and terrorism and the like—so a fantastic organisation for government with the service that they provide for the Victorian community.

Ms RICHARDS: Thank you, Minister. You have just mentioned climate change. Given that storms, floods and fires are becoming more frequent and more intense, as you just indicated then, how is the government planning to support community recovery from disasters?

Ms SYMES: Yes, this is a really important role for government and one that the community relies on, and as I said, we have more fires, floods and storms. They are just becoming more severe and more frequent, so ensuring that we have adequate resources and adequate structures in government to support recovery is really important. We saw this in the aftermath of the 2019–20 summer fires. We established Bushfire Recovery Victoria to help affected communities, help navigate government, collaborate with industry and deliver direct support.

Recognising that important organisation and their efforts, IGEM recommended the government establish a permanent, comprehensive entity dedicated to recovery management. So in response, Bushfire Recovery Victoria will undergo a transformation, and we are going to rebadge it as Emergency Recovery Victoria to provide a clear message to Victorians that we have a dedicated body to deploy and to lead recovery efforts for all emergencies in the state, whatever their form and wherever they occur. This investment will ensure that this body can ensure that Victorian communities can build back better, safer and stronger. It will lead the statewide coordination of recovery strategies, work with communities that are affected by disasters and coordinate responses from all of our government agencies. We know that from health, from fairness, from transport, everybody has a role to play, so to have a dedicated recovery agency that will be embedded in government and coordinate all those things is going to really be a great asset for Victorians who find themselves unfortunately impacted by a disaster.

Ms RICHARDS: Thanks, Minister.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. Mr Newbury.

Mr NEWBURY: Thank you. Minister, Graham Ashton's report into ESTA—will that be made public?

Ms SYMES: Yes, Mr Newbury, it will.

Mr NEWBURY: The full report?

Ms SYMES: Yes.

Mr NEWBURY: What was the time line for that release?

Ms SYMES: What is the time line for that release?

Mr NEWBURY: Yes.

Ms SYMES: Look, if you would not mind, I would not mind having just a few remarks in relation to the report. There is a lot of attention on it, and I understand why, because we are dealing with some challenges at ESTA. But this is a report that was commissioned before I was the minister and before the management team that are on board have been, and so it is not in response to some of the issues—

Mr NEWBURY: Sorry, wasn't the announcement in October?

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, could you—

Mr NEWBURY: No, I can just ask a question.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury.

Mr NEWBURY: Wasn't it October?

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, you have already asked a question, and the minister is attempting to answer it.

Mr NEWBURY: No, the minister is answering a different question.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, it is not for you to determine the answer. You asked the question, and the minister has the—

Mr NEWBURY: I asked the question about the time line, actually.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, the minister is attempting to answer your question. If you could allow her to answer it, we might all learn. Thank you.

Ms SYMES: The report is being given due consideration by government. It is close to being finalised in relation to being released alongside a government response, which is appropriate. It is a report that goes to providing a range of anecdotal accounts from workforce, emergency service agencies, industrial partners and other stakeholders, and it looks at the current governance structures of ESTA and makes recommendations about future long-term structures, funding and government arrangements. So we need to take the time to talk to all the parties that contributed to the report as well as those that would be impacted by any of the recommendations in the report. It is very close to being finalised and will be released in full to the public. But this is not a report that investigates specific incidents or adverse outcomes. I have been at pains to explain that this report is an examination of the organisation and what it should look like going forward into the future. And as your specific question related to whether it will be publicly released, I can absolutely confirm that that is going to happen.

Mr NEWBURY: I recall the announcement of the report in October, from memory. Does that sound right?

Ms SYMES: Mr Ashton was engaged to do the report before I was minister.

Ms FALKINGHAM: We announced the report, Mr Newbury, in October. We had obviously been working with Mr Ashton in relation to the terms of reference for his report in the lead-up to the announcement of this review.

Mr NEWBURY: So you were appointed in August, is that right? So it was pre August that that work—was it August?

Ms SYMES: I can come back to you on the specific dates, but Mr Ashton was engaged by the former minister.

Mr NEWBURY: Right. Sorry, it is just for the time line. I take it that obviously the Department of Health, DPC et cetera have received copies of the report as part of that consultation process?

Ms SYMES: Yes.

Mr NEWBURY: So the fact that the Premier is sitting on the report is his own choice.

Ms SYMES: I am the responsible minister, Mr Newbury. And I will be—

Mr NEWBURY: Well, actually, the Premier is the boss of the state. So he is sitting—

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, could you—

Mr NEWBURY: So he has a copy of the report, and he is choosing not to read it.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury.

Ms SYMES: The report is delivered to me. It is my responsibility.

Mr NEWBURY: You just said you have given it to DPC.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury.

Ms SYMES: I said they have been involved in providing—

Mr NEWBURY: You confirmed that. Has it been provided to DPC?

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, could you please stop interrupting the minister so that she has the opportunity to respond to your suggestions and your questions.

Ms SYMES: Mr Newbury, no-one is sitting on a report. It was delivered to me as the responsible minister. It will go through the appropriate government processes involving a range of government departments. A range of ministers' views will be incorporated. A government response will be released, which will interpret the recommendations of the report so that it is meaningful for that workforce about what the future looks like. It will be publicly released.

Mr NEWBURY: No, I understand. And I appreciate your confirmation that the Premier's office has it. He is just choosing not to read it, which I think is a character reflection on him.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury!

Ms SYMES: I have not confirmed that in any way whatsoever. I am the responsible minister. I am responsible for the release of that report. I will take it through appropriate cabinet processes and then release it to the public.

Mr NEWBURY: I appreciate your point, but if you are the Premier of the state and people are dying, you would read the report, you would think. But clearly that is not always the case.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury!

Mr NEWBURY: Commissioner, in the ESTA annual reports there was a reduction between financial years 2020 and 2021 of ambulance call takers—that is in the annual report. When that annual report was being prepared, did you provide advice to government on that reduced number—a concern perhaps?

Comm. CRISP: Sorry, which period?

Mr NEWBURY: 2020 and 2021.

The CHAIR: Sorry, Commissioner Crisp, perhaps you would like to take that question on notice. The member's time has expired.

Mr NEWBURY: Can you take it on notice? Thank you.

The CHAIR: I will pass the call to Ms Taylor.

Ms TAYLOR: Yes. If we could just look at support for the CFA and SES, if I refer you to budget paper 4, page 9, could you explain how the funding in the 2022–23 budget will support the Country Fire Authority and the State Emergency Service to keep Victorians safe?

Ms SYMES: Thank you, Ms Taylor, for your question. In addition to Wear Orange Wednesday, which is today, it is also National Volunteer Week, so it is a great opportunity to highlight the fantastic work that our amazing volunteers across the state do. As I have said, I know that all MPs in this room are very supportive of and value the contribution that the amazing SES and CFA volunteers make. And as I said, certainly what makes this role a really fantastic role is getting out and meeting volunteers on the ground, and I am thrilled that this year's budget provides significant support to the important role that they play. Their work is obviously at times very complex, and they operate in a dynamic environment. They need the tools, equipment and resources to get the job done. This includes facilities and a supportive environment that is conscious of the health and wellbeing of its members.

Unbelievably since coming into this role I have had major floods and storms, fires, an earthquake—we had a tsunami warning. I am waiting for the asteroid. But needless to say our emergency services personnel have performed extremely well regardless of what was thrown at them, so we do want our investment to match that effort. As a consequence we have contributed resources across the state for improved facilities. I have had the pleasure of opening many new and upgraded venues, and there are many infrastructure projects that are currently underway. Of course I want all of our emergency services volunteers operating out of first-rate, safe facilities, particularly in light of the increased frequency and severity of events that happen. I am pleased that we this year have \$27 million for training programs and vehicles and facilities at the CFA and more than

\$28 million to maintain VICSES facilities, upgrade priority vehicles and help volunteers respond to those floods and other emergencies that they have been responding to.

I know that new facilities do not just look good and nice and make the members pretty happy but make a significant difference to workplace health. They help prevent injury, improve response capabilities and improve volunteer retention and diversity. It is no secret that many SES and CFA buildings are ageing. I would love to do them all, but we are getting through them, and this investment will support the uplift in capability and improve both agencies in the important work that they do.

Ms TAYLOR: And you mentioned various pieces of funding for CFA and their volunteers. Can you explain in a bit more detail how this year's budget for CFA will improve emergency response capability and support CFA volunteers?

Ms SYMES: Thank you for the question in relation to that. The specific funding that will be invested is \$4 million at Sunraysia, Peshurst and Bangholme VEMTC training campuses, importantly, for female facilities, which are often lacking in traditionally male-dominated fields, whether they are sporting facilities or indeed our CFA facilities. So it is a really important initiative to make sure that we can provide great services for all of our volunteers and not just the blokes. There is a further \$5 million across the state for inclusive facilities at 40 priority stations. The CFA has identified a number of potential stations, and they are working to refine and finalise the final 40 stations shortly, which I know members, particularly here, would be interested to know in relation to investments in their electorates. So when we get some advice from CFA I would be very keen to give an update to members in relation to that.

It is great to get out and about and see the upgrades and be able to, in particular, encourage more women to come on board and volunteer their time, so I am certainly very proud of this investment, and I do want to acknowledge the work of the women's advisory committee of the CFA. It is one tangible example of how we are working with the CFA leadership team to improve the CFA culture and to support the recruitment and retention of female volunteers, and I have got to say that chief officer Jason Heffernan and CEO Natalie MacDonald have been fantastic in this space. They have a strong commitment to making the CFA a safe and inclusive place to be, and they certainly have not sat on these issues. They have advocated for this budget outcome, so I was very pleased to be able to work in partnership with them to deliver an outcome that fits with the sort of corporate vision of what they want the organisation to look like, particularly with the growth in female operational volunteers. So again, probably acknowledging the women's advisory committee—they do great work in relation to areas of ideas about how we can attract more and more people to the CFA regardless of their background.

Ms TAYLOR: Excellent.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mrs McArthur.

Mrs McARTHUR: Thank you, Chair. And thank you, Minister. Minister, the commitment from your government to create one fire service called Fire Rescue Victoria has clearly failed, because you still have division A for former MFB staff and division B for former CFA staff, operating on two totally different EBAs. Isn't it a fact that if Vermont South, in division A, has an extra member on day shift and Boronia, in division B, just 11 kilometres away, is one short, the Commissioner cannot direct Vermont staff to go to Boronia but the Boronia station could be required to fill a shift from as far away as Warrnambool, costing taxpayers up to \$1000 for that shift and millions of dollars a year because of your failure to harmonise fire services in Victoria? And this happened, Minister.

Ms SYMES: Mrs McArthur, fire services reform is a really important reform that is underpinned by community safety. We know that when you have reform of this size you have to have an implementation plan, and that is why we have an implementation monitor in Niall Blair. He has been consulting with members on their experiences about the fire services reform and any of the teething issues and bringing to the attention of me and the agencies things that can be done to make sure that we are addressing any of those issues. What I would highlight is that both career and volunteer firefighters remain committed to doing a great job and playing out why they do what they do. They do that to make sure that they can save lives and protect property and provide a service to Victorians. I do want to thank them for their exceptional hard work in keeping the community safe. This is an ongoing reform package. As I said, it is underpinned by community safety. We

want the right resources in the right place and the right support provided for volunteers, and indeed we want to make sure that we are attracting more and more people to provide that service to their community. I will continue to work with the implementation monitor on these issues. He is doing a really great job, and I meet with him regularly.

Mrs McARTHUR: Okay. Thank you, Minister. How much is it costing Victorian taxpayers in overtime because of your failure to harmonise the CFA and MFB into Fire Rescue Victoria under one EBA? It has almost been two years. Perhaps on notice, can you please provide the committee with the overtime employee expenses for 2020–21 and 2021–22?

Ms SYMES: Mrs McArthur, I would reiterate that our fire services do work tirelessly to protect lives and properties, and the community should—

Mrs McARTHUR: No, we just want the overtime amounts.

Ms SYMES: Well, I am just getting to the point. I will not be making apologies for ensuring that Victorians are safe and have access to some of the best firefighting capabilities in the world. Staff deserve to be paid for overtime. They work tirelessly, often needing to be available 24 hours a day, 365 days per year, to keep doing what they do, and they deserve the pay and conditions that support this enormous effort.

Mrs McARTHUR: And we are here to make sure taxpayers are getting value for money and scrutinising your expenditure. Commissioner, perhaps, can you inform the committee how many allowances are available to firefighters in Victoria?

Comm. CRISP: Mrs McArthur, I would have to take that one on notice. I do not know the specific number of allowances. But if I can just add to the minister's comments, just in terms of what our firefighters have experienced over the last two years with COVID, at times we have seen significant numbers of those members having to be furloughed, so therefore the need to backfill into certain roles in certain stations. That has certainly also contributed to the strain on the service as a whole.

Mrs McARTHUR: Well, Commissioner, community safety outcomes are clearly worse. Vaguely, is it over \$100 million? Yes or no?

Comm. CRISP: Sorry, is what over \$100 million?

Mrs McARTHUR: The expenditure.

Comm. CRISP: As I said, I will take it on notice in relation to the allowances.

Mrs McARTHUR: Okay. Well, Commissioner, what have you done to achieve the objective of interoperability of the fire services formerly MFB and CFA, now division 1 and division 2 respectively?

The CHAIR: Sorry to interrupt you, Mrs McArthur, but your time has expired, and I will pass the call to Mr Richardson.

Ms RICHARDS: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister, department representatives and Commissioner, for joining us today. I want to go to the topic of water safety, Minister. Obviously it is extremely critical with some of the challenges that we have faced and the lives that we have lost in Victoria. I want to take you to budget paper 3, pages 89 and 93. Are you able for the committee's benefit to explain the budget's investment in water safety across Life Saving Victoria and Marine Search and Rescue?

Ms SYMES: Thanks, Mr Richardson. As you point out, a really vital part of the emergency services response in Victoria is indeed helping people to stay safe around water and providing appropriate responses where people get into trouble. We obviously have some of the best inland and coastal facilities in the world, and many Victorians love spending holidays, weekends and free time around water. It is part of our culture. As a government we know that it is vital to support the agencies who work so hard to make sure that people across the state can continue to enjoy all of these environments safely.

Investing in water safety means having a world-class emergency response ready to go, from aerial assets like drones and helicopters to our amazing life-saving personnel patrolling beaches across Victoria. It also means

building resilient communities and making sure people have all the tools they need to play it safe by the water and are fully aware of the risks. Therefore this budget includes \$11.9 million for Life Saving Victoria to continue keeping Victorians safe in our waterways. It comes at a critical time for huge demand in water safety services as waterways and beaches in particular have become very busy and popular. The package includes \$3.26 million to continue lapsing programs and support base operating costs, half a million dollars to continue safety at public pools and \$4.537 million to continue life-saving services and volunteer-based programs. So it means that we have got more life-saving services at our beaches and inland waterways, better rescue capability, critical aerial assets and of course those important safety messages at public pools in conjunction with lifeguards. They are vital programs that will continue because of the funding in this year's budget.

Volunteer and paid lifesaving will be provided for rescue jet skis covering the Surf Coast, Mornington Peninsula and Geelong. There are some school programs being rolled out as well and importantly the redevelopment I think I mentioned in my presentation of the Sorrento Surf Life Saving Club, and the Seaford Life Saving Club will have some all-abilities infrastructure, because we know that investing in these facilities is not only providing great community assets but a great place to talk about and promote water safety and safe beach practices and the like. We have also had a continuation of messaging around community education campaigns about the risks and people knowing their limits—so a good investment in a really important part of Victorians' safety around water.

Comm. CRISP: Minister, do you want me to just add to your comments in relation to that?

Ms SYMES: I feel you have some passion in this space, so go for it.

Comm. CRISP: I do, being part of the water safety task force for the last couple of years, and we will never forget the 2021 summer season where 61 Victorians lost their lives. But again, the investment into Life Saving Victoria has enabled additional flying hours with the helicopter, drone surveillance, jet skis and patrols on the beaches. I had some figures provided to me over the last couple of days, and it is also important to focus on rescues. That is the great work, and that is what the investment enables to occur. In 2020–21 there were 612 rescues and 233 700 preventative actions, so where lifesavers have actually gone up to someone and said, 'Move, get back between the flags'. When you look at the last financial year, 2021–22, that has increased from 612 to 731 rescues and those preventative actions, because you have got more resources out there, to over 346 000. So it is a significant increase.

Ms SYMES: That was valuable. Thank you.

Mr RICHARDSON: Fantastic. I might leave it there, Chair. Thank you very much.

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

Mr HIBBINS: Thank you, Chair. I want to ask about the Dunkeld unit of the SES. Now, this is a unit that has grown rapidly and has got an increased responsibility for search and rescue operations now that the new Grampians trail is open. I understand that they need some new facilities and that the site has been identified and plans are underway for a new building but that the new building will be more expensive than originally first thought. Is the government going to ensure that there is enough money set aside to fully complete the new local SES headquarters in Dunkeld?

Ms SYMES: Thank you for your question, Mr Hibbins. I guess I can answer at a high level in relation to some of the messaging I have been given about the appropriate facilities for as many of our volunteers as possible certainly being the aim. In relation to Dunkeld, I do not have any specific information about that site or that unit on me, and unfortunately our officer who is responsible for infrastructure, who would have been able to provide that information quite easily, has had a family emergency which means that she is not here today. So if you are happy for us to—

Mr HIBBINS: Take that on notice?

Ms SYMES: take that on notice, I will get you some Dunkeld unit information.

Mr HIBBINS: Okay. Thank you. I want to now ask about our emergency services capability just in the light of the effects of climate change. In budget paper 3, page 89, there are a number of initiatives around emergency

management capability. I am specifically interested in our capability in response to floods and storms. Can you give us a total amount of funding associated with preparation for floods and storms?

Ms SYMES: I can give you the breakdown of SES funding, which is the key agency that responds to floods and storms. But as you would appreciate, as I indicated, we are funding the State Control Centre as well, which plays a role in particularly preparedness work, warnings, and also is the key place for information provision. They also house a representative from the BOM in there, who are pretty skilled at what they do and very conscious of the issues that you have raised because they follow global patterns and changes associated with climate change and give advice to our agencies in relation to what they can expect each season. So it is a collaboration in relation to storm and flood response, and I guess you then move into relief and recovery, which has a range of agencies that provide that support, which will be underpinned by the new rebadged agency, emergency recovery. So extrapolating a specific figure I think will be difficult, but hopefully that gives you a flavour of the range of agencies that provide work in that space.

Mr HIBBINS: Okay. Thank you. I am interested also in how much of the state's capability to respond to these kinds of events as a state is dependent on volunteers versus say paid staff. I understand there was a storm in the Dandenong Ranges last year that brought down a number of trees. How much of the emergency response there is paid staff and how much is volunteers?

Comm. CRISP: Thanks, Mr Hibbins. With regards to that event overnight on 9 and 10 June last year, which impacted a significant area of Victoria, basically from Trentham to Traralgon—so we had flooding down in Traralgon, as we all know, but significant storm damage in other parts of the state—I do not have those exact numbers, but it goes without saying more broadly across the emergency services sector as a whole we rely on about 100 000 volunteers, so significantly more than we have in terms of paid staff. So in relation to that particular event, again, SES, CFA and other volunteers certainly stood up and came to the fore. They would have been the majority of the resource that we utilised.

Mr HIBBINS: And taking that event for an example, how much does responding to an event like that actually cost?

Comm. CRISP: It is, again, difficult to quantify those hours, and we have not done that in relation to that particular event.

Mr HIBBINS: Okay, all right. Thank you. Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Hibbins, and thank you, Minister, Commissioner and officers. That concludes the time we have set aside for consideration of the emergency services portfolio today. The committee will follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing, and responses will be required within five working days of the committee's request.

The committee will now take a 30-minute break before resuming for consideration of the police portfolio at 11.55.

Witnesses withdrew.