

TRANSCRIPT

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the Victorian Government's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

Melbourne—Thursday, 13 August 2020

(via videoconference)

MEMBERS

Ms Lizzie Blandthorn—Chair

Mr Richard Riordan—Deputy Chair

Mr Sam Hibbins

Mr David Limbrick

Mr Gary Maas

Mr Danny O'Brien

Ms Pauline Richards

Mr Tim Richardson

Ms Ingrid Stitt

Ms Bridget Vallence

WITNESSES

Ms Jacinta Allan, MP, Minister for the Coordination of Transport: COVID-19,

Mr Paul Younis, Secretary,

Mr Nick Foa, Head of Transport Services, and

Mr Corey Hannett, Director-General, Major Transport Infrastructure Authority, Department of Transport.

The CHAIR: We declare open the hearing of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee. I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional Aboriginal owners of the land on which we are meeting. We pay our respects to them, their culture, their elders past, present and future, and elders from other communities who may be joining us in some way today.

This is the second series of public hearings for the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee Inquiry into the Victorian Government's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic. The committee will be reviewing and reporting to the Parliament on the responses taken by the Victorian government, including as part of the national cabinet, to manage the COVID-19 pandemic and any other matter related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Members are attending these hearings remotely from their homes and from their electorate offices. We ask that people note that members are not required to wear a face covering if they are working by themselves in an office under the stay-at-home directions of 6 August, part 2, section 7(i).

We also advise that all evidence taken by this committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. Therefore you are protected against any action for what you say here today, but if you repeat the same things outside this forum, including on social media, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript for you to check. Verified transcripts, presentations and handouts will be placed on the committee's website as soon as possible.

We invite you, Minister, to make a brief opening statement, no more than 8 minutes, and we ask that for the record you state your name, position and the organisation you represent for broadcasting purposes, and then this will be followed by questions from the committee. Thank you.

Mr RIORDAN: Chair, just before the witness starts—

The CHAIR: Yes, Deputy Chair?

Mr RIORDAN: Thank you, Chair. Chair, following yesterday's hearings it has been brought to my attention that there may have been an undeclared conflict of interest with your chairmanship. I have sought advice from the Clerk of the Assembly, who has recommended that advice be gained from the parliamentary integrity adviser. Given the possible conflict of interest is about yourself, as Deputy Chair I therefore move:

That this committee seeks advice from the parliamentary integrity officer about declaring conflicts of interest as recommended by the Clerk of the Assembly.

The CHAIR: So what are you suggesting is the conflict of interest, Deputy Chair?

Mr RIORDAN: It was brought to my attention after the meeting that you have an involvement or a close relationship with Minister Pakula's chief of staff and that this was a situation that perhaps should have been made known to all members of the committee before we started, particularly considering what turned out to be a most interventionist approach to our questioning of the minister yesterday, as noticed by members of the opposition, with constant interruptions.

Mr RICHARDSON: That is pathetic. That is how desperate you are this morning. With Michael O'Brien getting smashed and swearing off camera, you are going after the Chair.

Mr RIORDAN: Well, it is standard practice in committees to make—

The CHAIR: Thank you, Deputy Chair. Minister Pakula's chief of staff is my husband. I am not aware that that in and of itself is an argument that there is a conflict of interest. I do not actually believe that there is any

conflict of interest in and of itself in who a female or a male may actually be married to, and the suggestion is actually quite offensive. I do not believe that I have any conflict of interest to declare.

Mr RIORDAN: Chair, it is purely standard practice on most committees and procedures that when something is as closely related as that you make other committee members aware—because we were not aware of that at the start, and you were left with the role of chairing fairly.

Mr RICHARDSON: This is not the 1950s, mate. Women can think for themselves.

Mr RIORDAN: Mr Richardson, it is common practice on all committees that if you have close links to the topics of the day, you declare them. We are not asking—

Mr RICHARDSON: My wife is in local government. Should I declare, when local government representatives come up, that my wife is in local government?

Mr RIORDAN: No, no, no. If you were—

Mr RICHARDSON: Shall we go through every single member of Parliament's arrangements and relationships?

Mr RIORDAN: The advice I have received from the Clerk of the lower house is that this is something that should be looked at, or could be looked at, because it is not clear.

Mr RICHARDSON: Could be, should be, wanna, gonna.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Deputy Chair. 'Could be' and 'should be' are two very different things. I am more than happy to seek the counsel of the Clerk on this matter and any other matter, as evidenced yesterday with the ridiculous points of order we started yesterday's hearing with. For the moment we are in a public hearing and we have a witness before us. I am more than happy to defer to the Clerk for her advice in relation to that, but for now we have a witness before us and we will move to consideration of the witness who is before us. I invite the minister to make an 8-minute opening statement.

Ms ALLAN: Thank you, Chair. I am going to endeavour to share my screen. Chair, could you confirm that you can see my presentation on the screen?

The CHAIR: We cannot yet, Minister, but it does take a moment to load.

Ms ALLAN: Sorry. I have got to press 'share'. No, look, I think the technology might be going to beat me today, Chair. I am going to give it one last crack.

I am not going to try any more, Chair. I am going to do a quick whip-through of the presentation, and I will seek your guidance on the way through as to how much time I have available given the slightly interrupted start we have had just now from the Deputy Chair. I really want to thank the—

The CHAIR: No worries. Perhaps if your staff want to email it to the committee secretariat, they can email it to our committee members.

Ms ALLAN: Yes. My staff are listening. I will get them to email it, and perhaps we can catch up.

Mr D O'BRIEN: We have actually got it. It has been sent to us already—the presentation.

Ms ALLAN: Have you? Excellent. I hope you have read it, Danny, and taken good notes.

Look, thank you for the opportunity to talk to you this morning about matters related to the transport portfolio and the department in terms of how we are dealing with the really big challenges around the COVID-19 pandemic. The focus in our department has been on a couple of key areas. One is supporting the mobility of people around our community but also looking at how we continue to support the program of transport infrastructure across the whole of the state, keeping projects going and keeping our community safe at the same time.

One of the big pieces of work we have been doing over the past number of months—and I think I reported on this the last time I spoke to the committee—is how we were looking at working closely with our construction partners in the construction industry, unions and employers, to both protect the safety of the workers and the worksites that we are working on and also support jobs. There has been a huge amount of work. I look forward over the course of this morning, Chair, to talking to you and your colleagues about the extensive mitigation measures that have been put in place. There has already been a huge amount of work go on throughout this period of the pandemic to put in place changed work practices—changing the way staff and the workforce move around our worksites and changing some of the activities on the worksites themselves to protect the safety of workers whilst making sure that our projects and our program continue.

That is also backed up by our 70-strong safety team whose job it is to conduct some spot-test audits across all of these sites. To date there have been nearly 3000 site inspections across the state. What is a really positive outcome from those site inspections is how we have seen the way that all parties across our program have responded really positively and are taking deeply seriously their responsibilities around keeping themselves safe, keeping worksites safe and keeping our community safe as well.

In terms of the building program one of the more recent pieces of work that we have been undertaking is delivering Transport's share of projects through the \$2.7 billion building works package that was announced by the government back in May. There are a number of elements that go into the transport portfolio that we are supporting—for example, significant investment in road maintenance and road resurfacing. We have got targeted funds to bushfire-affected areas where there is work to be done on repairing particularly the road network in those bushfire-affected communities; work to also upgrade our regional rail network, important for our regional rail freight network, where we are investing \$90 million to upgrade and replace sleeper structures. Indeed, across our regional network it is estimated that 300 kilometres of sleepers and ballast will be renewed as part of this work.

There is also work on our rolling stock as part of this package. Regional trains and Melbourne trams will benefit from a \$62.6 million investment in maintenance and restoration works, and a significant proportion of this is going to go towards improving and supporting our V/Line rolling stock. There are also funds—\$23 million, in fact—to upgrade and improve stations and stops on our public transport networks, really supporting those elements of our public transport network that passengers interact with every single day. Sixteen train stations will be upgraded across the state. There are funds, \$5.6 million, towards rubbish and graffiti removal and also managing vegetation along our train corridors, which can be a factor in causing some disruption to the network. And then finally there are also funds to upgrade piers like the Portarlington pier and a number of improvements to wharves, piers and jetties in various locations around the state such as Portland, Western Port, Mornington Peninsula and Port Welshpool.

One of the things I look forward to sharing in more detail this morning in our conversation is some of the changes to traffic movements and passenger movements that we are seeing across our transport network, and there is no doubt particularly those of you who may have the need to travel on our roads in the metropolitan areas will have obviously noticed the significant drop in traffic levels. What we are doing during this period of time is looking at how we can make new interventions in our road network to address road issues post the pandemic, and that is why there have been some announcements made towards the end of June around investment in new technology, new CCTV cameras across the metropolitan network, looking at how we can make interventions as road traffic starts to come back in larger volumes and as we have more people travelling around our road network. We know that congestion has been an issue pre the pandemic, and we know it is likely to be an issue post the pandemic. So we are using this period of time to get in there and make this investment in new technology—as I have mentioned, CCTV cameras, wireless travel-time sensors. And we are also looking at retiming the sequencing of hundreds of traffic lights around the suburbs of Melbourne—there was an analysis undertaken—and how they can be resequenced to maximise traffic flow along some of the busiest routes in suburban parts of the city.

This is a big package that will also include looking at how we can improve the management of arterial road clearways. From October all arterial road clearways within 20 kilometres of the CBD will be strengthened to tow-away zone status, and also there will be a much stronger level of enforcement of the clearways and new penalties for people who park illegally in those clearways. Plus, and this is something that was announced a few weeks ago as well, we will be looking at reintroducing road occupation charges as a measure to encourage really deep thought about how, if you need to block a lane of road for a particular construction activity, that is

only done if absolutely necessary, because we know that depriving a lane of traffic on a key arterial road can be a serious cause of congestion.

Moving on to the public transport network, where again we are seeing—

The CHAIR: Sorry to interrupt you there, Minister, but the time for the presentation has expired, and I will hand the call to the Deputy Chair, Mr Riordan.

Mr MAAS: Point of order, Chair.

The CHAIR: Yes, Mr Maas?

Mr MAAS: Look, I am aware that, if we are working from our offices, we should be there by ourselves, and if we are not there by ourselves, we should be wearing a face mask. I am just wondering if the Deputy Chair is actually in his office by himself, because I am not exactly sure that that is the case.

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, are you in your office by yourself? And if not, you should be wearing a face mask.

Ms VALLENCE: To the point of order, Chair—

The CHAIR: Well, Mr Riordan is trying to speak but Mr Riordan has his mute button on. Mr Riordan had the call first.

Mr RIORDAN: Chair, I am in a room by myself. My staff in a country community do not always have access to the necessary internet and other things. I am aware from time to time they have come to the office—well, I do not even know if they have, but they have been able to come to the office. As I am sitting in this room, I have no idea whether they are here or not at the moment because I cannot hear phones, I cannot hear anything, so I cannot confirm unless you are happy for me to get up and walk into the office to see if anyone is here.

The CHAIR: Well, Mr Riordan, we will defer to your judgement, but we assume that you are abiding by the directions of the Chief Health Officer.

Mr RIORDAN: Yes, I am adhering to the officer. It is also important to remember, Chair, that we are in stage 3 here, so my staff have capacity to move around the community unlike members of staff in Melbourne. But at this stage I am in this room by myself. I am unaware if there are staff members in my office.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Vallenge, did you have something to add?

Ms VALLENCE: Yes, just two points quickly—that I understand that Mr Riordan is in stage 3 restrictions not stage 4, and also that I understand that the Chief Health Officer's advice is that if you are in your workspace but behind the closed door in an office and by yourself in that space, you are not required to wear a face mask, and particularly when you are broadcasting.

Mr RIORDAN: Madam Chair, I am also happy to clarify that, as the committee is well aware from my various comments, my community has had an unprecedented outbreak and my office has maintained a very, very busy and public presence in the community. And absolutely I make no apologies for the hard work and ongoing commitment that my staff have made to looking after the community, including the delivering of groceries and other items that have not been provided by the government to members of my community in isolation. So, Chair, if you would like, I will text the staff to see where they are.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Riordan. I think the point of order was raised because people heard you asking someone to close the door. We will assume you are abiding by the directions, and we will move on. The call is with you. The timer is now starting for you to ask your questions of the minister.

Mr RIORDAN: Thank you. My first question is to Secretary Younis. Secretary, on Tuesday we heard about the interdepartmental committee that managed and executed the hotel quarantine program. What role, if any, did the Department of Transport have on that committee?

Mr YOUNIS: Thank you, Deputy Chair, for the question. So our role in relation to that committee which was associated with managing international arrivals was quite clear. We had the task of transferring passengers from the airport through to hotel quarantine. It was very specific what our role was. To do that, we commissioned SkyBus in that arrangement. SkyBus were available. Clearly they have a significant fleet that they can draw on to fulfil that task and were under-utilised at the time. So our role was really quite specific. We were part of the State Control Centre to do that. SkyBus were available. They have a fleet of vehicles that are custom-built for that type of thing. They have a depot nearby the airport. That was very valuable for us because then we could deep clean the vehicles regularly after every trip that they had. SkyBus also have the type of fleet that allowed for social distancing to occur on the vehicles. They could have rear-loading. They also had a range of people and drivers that were familiar with the airport environments. They were also familiar with driving into the city and delivering to hotels. So they were well placed to not only provide the service and fill the service that we were required to fulfil but could do it in a really safe manner with custom-built vehicles for airport delivery and pick-up and a depot nearby for deep cleaning.

We also as a part of that were able to work with SkyBus in that arrangement to ensure that there was strong PPE equipment and information available to drivers—that they could be separated from the passengers—because our assumption of course was that we would need to make sure the people doing this task were in a safe environment.

Mr RIORDAN: Secretary, did you attend any of those meetings?

Mr YOUNIS: I think it was made clear that the State Control Centre has a well-established emergency management structure. We have representatives on the State Control Centre. The State Control Centre has actually been established and set up since December through the bushfire process.

Mr RIORDAN: Yes. But did you sit on that committee?

Mr YOUNIS: So the State Control Centre process is set up that way, and we have transport representatives embedded into the State Control Centre the entire time to give transport advice and give—

Mr RIORDAN: But did you attend any of those committee meetings?

Mr YOUNIS: So when we have an emergency situation, I call on the resources of our emergency management department. We have an emergency management department in our transport operations area, and—

Mr RIORDAN: So just, sorry—

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, could you allow the witness to answer the question, please?

Mr YOUNIS: So, Mr Riordan, when there is a specific issue like this, we provide representatives and representations to those committees. Those representatives are fully briefed. And of course it is not just one representative we provide, because in an emergency situation, as you can appreciate, they are not something that just happens today, they go on—particularly ones that go on for a long time.

Mr RIORDAN: But did you attend?

Mr YOUNIS: So personally, I did not attend those specific meetings. Of course I was briefed after every meeting. We have an emergency management structure that allows for the executive to be briefed effectively. We have people engaged through our transport operations in our emergency management part of the department to be engaged in the State Control Centre processes.

Mr RIORDAN: Okay, right. So the question is: you did not attend the meeting on the 28th. You did not attend that meeting, but you had representatives. Can you tell us who the representatives were at that meeting?

Mr YOUNIS: Mr Riordan, what I was trying to say is there is a range of people in our organisation that would represent us in that space, and—

Mr RIORDAN: So, what, two members?

Mr YOUNIS: It is somewhat irrelevant who the individual was because we have a mechanism to make sure that we do not rely on a single individual, because these emergencies go on. They are 24/7. If you are in a bushfire situation 24/7, we have to have people who are fully briefed, are fully part of that process and understand what is going on. So not only do we have a group of people that are briefed on this, we have transition processes in place. If someone goes in and out, they can be basically—

Mr RIORDAN: So you were fully briefed that the ADF were not going to be used and instead we were going to have hotel security managed by security companies rather than the defence force? Were you briefed from this very well coordinated team that you have that keep you fully abreast and briefed of the meetings? Were you told that?

Mr YOUNIS: So, Mr Riordan, I think it is really clear what our role is. We are a transport department. In any emergency situation you call on the resources and expertise of different agencies. It is a multi-agency approach. What I was briefed on was what our role is, the specific issues that we would be able to deal with. What was very clear to me was what our role was. Our role was to transport people from the airport.

Mr RIORDAN: Okay. So who was looking after that transport, Secretary Younis? Was it to be the police, security guards or the army?

Mr YOUNIS: Sorry, I missed the question.

Mr RIORDAN: In these very extensive briefings you had to do with just transport, was it the police, security guards or the army who were designated to look after the people on your buses?

Mr YOUNIS: I cannot recall exactly who was looking after the people on the buses. They were to be escorted to the bus. We took over from the bus. They were put onto the bus. As I said, we have got really strict and detailed processes to ensure that there is security and that people are safe on our buses.

Mr RIORDAN: So who was making them all safe, Secretary? Who was making them safe?

Mr YOUNIS: We have a process in place that allows for, and I explained that—to make sure that these people were safe. They were in a safe environment.

Mr RIORDAN: But you are not telling me who was making them safe. Was it the police, the army or security companies? Who was keeping them safe on your buses?

Mr YOUNIS: So, Mr Riordan, it is not just an individual is what I am trying to say. We have a whole process in place to keep people safe.

Mr RIORDAN: Well, it is pretty simple. There is a process, but who was doing the process? The police, the army or security companies?

Mr YOUNIS: Well, as I am trying to say, it is not one person or one individual. We have a role to play in keeping people safe on our buses, the same as we have a role to play—

Mr RIORDAN: So, Secretary Younis, sorry, if you have a role to play and you keep people really safe and these are great buses that you are running, surely as the boss of it you knew who was keeping them safe. Was it the police, the army or the security guards?

Mr YOUNIS: Mr Riordan, as I said, we had a really specific role in this. I am very clear what our role was. Our role was to get a safe transport service—

Mr RIORDAN: You do not know who was keeping them safe?

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, you are not allowing the Secretary to answer the question.

Mr YOUNIS: We are talking about the elements of security. That was not my role. Quite frankly, Mr Riordan, I have got 2500 trains to run every day. I have got 13 000 trams to get on the network.

Mr RIORDAN: Sorry, Secretary Younis, there are 6 million people to keep safe in Victoria, and you were responsible for transporting them, and you are telling us you do not know—

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, you are out of order.

Mr YOUNIS: So, Mr Riordan, I have a specific role. What I do know, Mr Riordan, is that there are processes in place, and my role was very specific. I was responsible for transporting people from the airport to the motel. There is a structure in place within Victoria. The State Control Centre makes sure all the other elements of security are managed through that process. We feed into that process the transport responsibilities, and I am very confident that we have fulfilled our role effectively.

Mr RIORDAN: Okay, well, we will leave it at that. You cannot tell us who was responsible for looking after the people on your buses. That is quite clear. I would like to go back to the minister if I can. Minister, Victoria is facing a crisis in this second wave with deaths, uncontrolled community transmission, increases in suicide and mental health issues, forecast double-digit unemployment and multibillion-dollar blows to our economy. In recent days we have heard testimony from senior bureaucrats, and again today, from your senior bureaucrat, who have apparently made the big decisions with no reference to the Premier or the crisis cabinet, and in many cases senior bureaucrats have been unable to tell this committee who their responsible minister is. Given all of this, by what measure would you say the crisis cabinet has been a success?

Ms ALLAN: Well, Deputy Chair, you know that that is a question that is inviting me to provide speculation, not facts. You know that that is a question that falls well and truly outside of my bounds as to why I am here today at the committee, which is to provide the committee answers to questions. I am absolutely very happy and comfortable to provide answers to questions that go to my responsibilities as the minister in the transport portfolio.

What has been laid out to you very clearly over the course of this week, and also previously, is that the state deployed the appropriate structures to respond to, firstly, what was a state of emergency and more recently is a state of disaster. In state of emergency arrangements, the state emergency centre is stood up, departments work together collectively, all with their own very clear responsibilities and accountabilities, reporting back to their line ministers, and the crisis council of cabinet has been established as a mechanism to coordinate that activity at a cabinet level. Frankly, the inferences in your question border on offensive in terms of what you just outlined in your commentary. I am very clear on my role as a minister, my accountabilities as a minister, my relationships that I have to my department and to my fellow ministers on the Crisis Council of Cabinet and cabinet more broadly. And can I also add in response to your previous question to the Secretary, where you refused to allow him to provide the information—

Mr RIORDAN: Minister, he had minutes to answer. He was asked a simple question.

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, can you allow the minister to answer, please?

Ms ALLAN: In terms of the operation of the SkyBus services we worked—as in the Department of Transport—I am advised that because we were dealing with international arrivals, there was a role there for border force in terms of the disembarking of passengers from various aircraft, and Victoria Police had a role as well. So let us be really clear. The responsibility of the Department of Transport in this instance was to have a contractual arrangement in place with SkyBus, where the staff were appropriately trained and they were provided with PPE, and that was the role that the Department of Transport has performed through that part of the operation.

Mr RIORDAN: Minister, as a crisis cabinet minister, clearly with a very important role to play in keeping Victorians safe with quarantine, have you had any briefings from the emergency management commissioner?

Ms ALLAN: Well, I am not in a position to provide details, and I think the Treasurer gave you a similar answer in similar terms yesterday. It is just not appropriate to provide, to go into commentary on, what is discussed in cabinet forums. That is a longstanding practice.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. I am sorry to interrupt you there, but the member's time has expired. I will pass the call to Mr Gary Maas, MP.

Mr MAAS: Thank you, Chair. Good morning, Minister, and good morning to your departmental officials as well. Thank you for your presentation. I would just like to take you to the topic of public transport services and patronage. The Victorian government has of course taken a number of steps to keep public transport and other

essential transport services operating during this pandemic. Would you be able to take the committee through, Minister, what steps the government has taken to keep our public transport system running throughout this time?

Ms ALLAN: Yes, thank you, Mr Maas. As I think I reported to this committee previously, we worked very, very hard throughout the entire time of the pandemic to make sure that we can continue to provide a full timetable service, and I will come to some of the changes we have made in more recent times as a consequence of metropolitan Melbourne moving into stage 4 level of restrictions.

We have worked very, very hard to provide a full suite of public transport services, recognising that for so many people who may be working in our hospitals, working in our retail sector, they rely on public transport services to get around. And so that is why there has been an enormous amount of work that has gone into enhancing over and above the, if you like, pre-COVID arrangements around cleaning of our public transport network and keeping those cleaning arrangements. They were significantly enhanced through the course of—well, from the very early days from when the pandemic first hit our city and state. And that is why there has been additional cleaning across all of our metropolitan and regional trains, across the tram network and across buses as well. Some of the really practical examples have been extensive deep cleaning of our rolling stock every night. There has been wiping down of high-touch surfaces, where people interact with the infrastructure if you like—a lot of those touch points. We have also installed over 300 touchless hand sanitising stations across some of our busiest train stations, tram stops and bus terminals across Victoria.

Can I also just share with the committee some of the data, if you like, if I can, in terms of addressing this question? One of the issues has been, throughout this pandemic, thinking about what we can do—practical measures like those I have outlined—to keep our public transport system as clean and safe as possible. But also too we know with significant reduction in passenger numbers that has meant that there has been quite a lot of social distancing going on on our public transport network. The latest information I have, which has come in overnight on the usage of the network yesterday, was that the number of passengers on our metropolitan train network was down to 8 per cent of pre-COVID normal figures. So that, I think, demonstrates really clearly how Melburnians have responded to the requirements of stage 4 level restrictions to stay home and only travel for those very small number of essential reasons, and we certainly thank Victorians for their role in respecting those restrictions and helping keep our community safe.

To give you a sense of what that 8 per cent represents, back before the pandemic hit Victoria February passenger numbers were around 2.35 million daily trips across our public transport network. We are now seeing quite a dramatic drop to 9 per cent overall, but the figure I gave for metropolitan trains was 8 per cent, the tram network 7 per cent, regional trains 6 per cent. There are a few more people catching the metropolitan bus network; that sits at 14 per cent at the moment, which is I guess not surprising given the spread of those buses more predominately throughout the suburbs and the city. And so that does show that some of the challenges we face in running an operational network have been to keep running the service, providing the services in a clean way and supporting people so only those people who need to go out for those key reasons can have the access to the services that they need.

Mr MAAS: Thank you, Minister. You recently increased train and tram services as well. Can you provide further detail and the reason for those changes?

Ms ALLAN: Yes, certainly. This is one of the aspects of the work that we are doing in the transport portfolios with my transport portfolio colleagues. We are looking at both the changed pattern and the changed movement of people throughout this pandemic and then thinking about what we need to do to plan as people come back, using particularly public transport. And so one of the actions we have already taken and announced, and I believe this was announced back in June, is that we have added already an extra 95 metropolitan train services, and we have added those 95 extra train services—that is a weekly figure—on either side of the morning and afternoon peak into what is called the shoulder peak period. And what we are doing is we are responding very clearly. As people start to come back, as we move into a stage where restrictions are starting to ease, as we are seeing Victorians respond really strongly to managing to drive the numbers down of this virus, as people start to return to using the network, we know that people are going to want to maintain some of those social-distancing practices and want to maintain using a public transport network in a safe way. The wearing of masks is a big part of that, and we are all getting out and about in our masks and that is going to be a big part of it, but we are also too adding extra services to give people more options as to how they can choose a different

service, particularly in those very busy peak periods. That will assist with people being able to continue to use our public transport network. So that is the thinking behind adding those, as I described them, shoulder peak services—as I said, those services that sit on either side of the morning and afternoon peak.

We have also added a couple of shuttle routes on our tram network during weekday peak periods along St Georges Road, Brunswick Street and Collins Street, again looking at those parts of the network that are busiest, that during more normal times carry bigger numbers. We have been able to identify where we have got the rolling stock capacity and the capacity on the network to quickly move in and add those extra services.

So that is what we have done already. We are looking at what else we can do across the public transport network. I should also mention while I am on this theme our public transport staff, who I really acknowledge and thank for the terrific work they do working through this period of the pandemic, from drivers to our frontline staff to the staff who operate the control centres across the entire network. We have got a lot of people cleaning the network as well. They are doing a great job. One of the initiatives we have taken to help slow the spread and to manage this issue is our public transport staff are not handling cash. That has been a particular issue for our bus network, so we have put in place those measures on top of all those other measures that I mentioned before around cleaning and the extra services to support people's continued and safe use of public transport.

And just finally can I mention too the other aspect of this is to continue, whether we are in stage 4 or stage 3 level restrictions, encouraging people to only travel for those reasons that they are allowed to, only travel if people feel well. None of us should be going out and about if we are not feeling well, and we should be getting tested, and that is really applicable to the use of our public transport network more broadly.

Mr MAAS: Thanks, Minister. Also in relation to PT services, would you be able to update us on the effect the pandemic is having on PT operators? And what is the government doing to assist them and to protect jobs as well?

Ms ALLAN: Yes, thank you. Again this is another area where, whether it is the Minister for Public Transport, Minister Carroll, whether it is our Secretary and our Head of Transport Services, there has been close and deep work done with our transport operators—Metro Trains, Yarra Trams and V/Line; our bus operators, our extensive bus operators; and also our commercial passenger vehicle service providers—to look at each of their operations, if you like, and be able to respond and support them. We have talked already a lot this morning about how we are providing those additional elements to, say, the cleaning of our rolling stock and the cleaning of the network.

We are also working, for example—and this is some work that was announced more recently. There is some work that we have done with the commercial passenger vehicle sector, where our colleague the Member for Oakleigh, alongside a Member for Eastern Metropolitan Region, Rod Barton, has done a lot of work consulting with the commercial passenger vehicle sector, consulting on [Zoom dropout]. Sorry, Mr Maas, my screen just went blank there for a minute.

The CHAIR: That is all right. We have you.

Mr MAAS: Yes, you are coming through loud and clear.

Ms ALLAN: Excellent, excellent. It is a foggy, wet day here in Bendigo, so I am hoping it is not going to interrupt our technology too much. I think I was mid-sentence in discussing the commercial passenger vehicle supports. Our commercial passenger vehicles: taxis, rideshare—we know that they are services that some members of our community particularly rely on, especially people with a disability. For some people those taxi services are the only access, the only way they can get about in using public transport. That is why more recently the government has announced that it will invest \$22 million towards a range of initiatives to boost the industry to make sure that those services are there, the wheelchair-accessible taxis, and that people who use the multipurpose taxi program can continue to access those services. And then also too for some of the bus operators, for some of the commercial passenger vehicle operators, they operate as private businesses as well, and so they may have also been eligible for various federal and state levels of support. And one of the—

The CHAIR: Sorry to interrupt you there, Minister, but the member's time has expired. I will hand the call to Mr Sam Hibbins, MP.

Mr HIBBINS: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Minister and Secretary, for appearing before the inquiry today. Minister, in the range of initiatives you outlined to make changes to our transport network in response to COVID-19, it is a bit concerning that there was a clear absence of any mention of improving the safety for pedestrians and cyclists and actually increasing their access to the transport network. This has been an essential feature of government responses around the world and in Sydney as well—to allocate more road space for cyclists and for pedestrians. Why is this not a greater priority for the government?

Ms ALLAN: Well, Mr Hibbins, can I thank you for that question because I would disagree. There is not an absence of initiatives. I was saving my information on this topic for your question. I may have anticipated that you were going to ask this question, and I was saving the information for your question because there is a lot of work that is being done in terms of support. You touched on this—one is the safety aspect of providing safe journeys for people who choose to cycle or walk, depending on where they are going and what they are wanting to use it for. I think we talked about this last time I appeared before the committee as well. We have seen a significant increase during this period of the pandemic in recreational cycling and walking, and I will come to some of the initiatives that we have instituted over the last few months. Some of the initiatives have been responding to that as well as those issues that sit around helping people to choose to cycle or walk for work purposes or to be able to access services in their local community.

One of the actions we have undertaken during this period of the pandemic is that there has been a lot of close work with the City of Melbourne on looking at how we can fast-track protected bike lanes on key routes. There has been a lot of work done with the Lord Mayor and also officials at the City of Melbourne to look at how we can better connect. There are parts of that inner-metropolitan area where there are existing protected bike lanes, but there have been, and this is what was identified by the City of Melbourne, some gaps, if you like, and we have worked with the City of Melbourne and the Department of Transport to look at how we can fast-track the protected bike lanes and keep—

Mr HIBBINS: What is the progress of that? Because I note there are some proposals from the City of Melbourne and other councils to actually fast-track bike lanes on state-controlled roads, which is obviously a state government responsibility. Where are we up to with those proposals?

Ms ALLAN: Look, I might ask our officials to come back to you, Mr Hibbins, on that. That is something that was very much dealt with at the department level with those councils. I am happy to provide that information. They may want to supplement my answer at the end, but I just want to give a couple more bits of information, if I can. I mentioned in my presentation that you have all got but did not get to see on the screen that as part of the government's building works package that was announced back in May, there were a number of initiatives to support walking and cycling. Indeed there is \$13 million of investment being put into those areas in regional communities. I think you would agree with me, Mr Hibbins, that it does not matter whether you are in Melbourne or in regional communities, having a safe—

Mr HIBBINS: Well, some tourism trails in regional Victoria are probably in a different category to the high rate of bicycle usage in metropolitan Melbourne.

Ms ALLAN: Mr Hibbins, I am disappointed to hear you being a little bit mealy-mouthed about providing safe pedestrian access to things like the Heathcote Hospital, which is part of the package of works. Providing safe, active transport, whether it is walking or cycling, for regional communities is just as important, in my view, as it is for metropolitan Melbourne residents.

Mr HIBBINS: It is possibly even more important, given that is where the funding has gone. If they were equal, I think we would all be happy. But I do want to ask actually about the broader question, in that other governments around the world are actively pursuing a policy of mode shift and taking this opportunity while cars are off the road to actively shift people's transport habits towards more active transport and sustainable transport. Some modelling has been undertaken by the Institute for Sensible Transport that says that we might need up to 50 000 extra bike trips during peak hours if our public transport system is to remain safe in the future. Is that modelling consistent with what the state government has, and are you actually taking this opportunity now to pursue an active policy of mode shift?

Ms ALLAN: Well, Mr Hibbins, I am confident you are across this. I think it was released in 2018; one of my officials can confirm this for me, but we have got our active transport strategy. Can I also remind you that

as part of all of our major transport infrastructure projects we build into the design and the policy settings for those projects cycling and walking as part of those projects—

Mr HIBBINS: But it goes to the heart, Minister, of policy—

Ms ALLAN: Mr Hibbins, if you would just let me finish, what you are suggesting is that the government does not place a priority and a policy around—

Mr HIBBINS: But I am asking the question—

The CHAIR: Mr Hibbins, could you allow the minister to answer the question, and then you can follow up the question if it is unsatisfactory.

Ms ALLAN: And what I am suggesting to you is that we have it embedded in a range of different areas across government. I was about to share with you, for example, that as part of our level crossing removal program, just on that one area, and I will come to some of the others, we are building more than 45 kilometres of new bike paths across Melbourne, 15 kilometres of which is on the Frankston line. I know the Member for Mordialloc can probably give us chapter and verse in terms of, I think, the 3.4 kilometres of new walking and cycling paths as part of the Mentone and Cheltenham level crossing removals. I know, Chair, you are aware of the walking and cycling connections we are building as part of the Upfield line. So I am saying to you that we have built more than 200 kilometres of new bike paths as part of embedding this policy setting in our planning and delivery of our project infrastructure.

On top of that, there are other initiatives run by the TAC, other initiatives run with schools that all come together to demonstrate I think quite clearly that the government does place a priority both on the safety of the people who want to walk and cycle—

Mr HIBBINS: The question I am asking, Minister, is: I mean, it is the difference between this, you know, yes, project pledge, but is the ultimate aim of the government to have a greater mode shift of more people cycling? And particularly in response to COVID, if everyone who cannot use public transport jumps in their car we are going to be faced with a congestion crisis. Modelling has been done by the Institute for Sensible Transport which indicates 50 000 more people may be needed to get on their bikes. Is this the policy of the government, to actually pursue mode share?

Ms ALLAN: The policy of this government is to provide people with choices about how they choose to move around our city and state. I think depending on your own set of personal circumstances—depending on where you work, where you live, whether you have kids, whether you are caring for an older member of your family—our view is giving people choices about how they move around our city and the state. Yes, you will have noticed, I am sure, that a feature of our government has been to make a greater investment than any other government in public transport infrastructure, so we are putting more services on our public transport network right across the state, giving more public transport options, and also part of that is increasing accessibility for walking and cycling.

I think it is wrong to characterise active transport as just being something that is for people who live in the inner city or people who want to ride their bike really fast. Active transport is all of it.

Mr HIBBINS: I did not make that characterisation.

Ms ALLAN: And I know all of us if we can, and we have seen this through the pandemic, when people have been given the opportunity they have got out there on their bike, they are taking the kids for a walk. The increase in recreational cycling has been terrific. Talk to your local bike shop. They will tell you how popular bikes are at the moment.

Mr HIBBINS: Well, we are singing from the same hymn sheet, Minister, but you would be aware that people have made that shift, but unless the investment is then made in safe cycling infrastructure, whether it is pop-up bike lanes or fast-tracked permanent bike lanes, that mode shift and that opportunity that people have taken—particularly people with families, women, people who are wanting to cycle but otherwise are concerned and do not cycle because of the lack of infrastructure—unless there is the investment, that mode shift will not be permanent.

Ms ALLAN: Well, Mr Hibbins, in our furious agreement with each other—as we have been arguing with each other and being in furious agreement on the way through—perhaps I need to go back and repeat some of the examples I have given you. I have spoken about the 200 kilometres of new bike paths that we are building, I have referenced the \$100 million Active Transport fund, I have referenced the new initiatives through the building work packages. There is the work we are doing; we have added 100 extra schools to our Ride2School program. There has been the work with the city council. There has been the work that is done through the TAC with road safety initiatives. There is the work that is being done on upgrading safer footpaths for rural and regional communities, like making the footpath to the Heathcote hospital a better connection so people can have a safer journey on those footpaths.

Mr HIBBINS: Are you looking to fast-track the St Kilda Road safe bike lanes? Is that an option on the table for the government?

The CHAIR: Mr Hibbins, we cannot quite hear you when you are talking over the top of someone in this forum.

Mr HIBBINS: The St Kilda Road safe bike lanes, which are not due to be completed until 2025—is that something that the government is looking to fast-track?

Ms ALLAN: You will know, Mr Hibbins, that that was an election commitment made at the 2018 election. We are undertaking the planning for that right now. Part of that planning needs to be undertaken with the delivery of the Metro Tunnel of course, a very big public transport investment in our city that will provide more public transport choices when that project is finished. We are needing to work closely with that project on how we best deliver the St Kilda Road bike lane commitment. And that work is being undertaken right now.

Mr HIBBINS: Can I ask, in terms of the changes to public transport, the increased services that were announced, how much does that actually come to—the costing for that?

The CHAIR: I am sorry to interrupt you, Mr Hibbins, but your time has expired—

Mr HIBBINS: Take it on notice.

The CHAIR: and I will hand the call to Mr Danny O'Brien, MP.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Thank you, Chair, and good morning, Minister and officials. Mr Younis, can I just confirm that the Department of Transport had representatives at the meeting at the State Control Centre on 27 March where the hotel quarantine program was arranged?

Mr YOUNIS: Thank you, Mr O'Brien. Earlier I said that we were represented at the State Control Centre, and we were represented at that specific meeting as well that you are referring to.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Thank you. Minister, can I ask: were you briefed about the outcomes of that meeting?

Ms ALLAN: Yes, the Secretary rang me to advise me of the request to make the connection with SkyBus to deliver the services, as the Secretary reported previously.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Were there any questions raised about security either on the transport network or in the hotels at that stage?

Ms ALLAN: No, because our request was a very defined and clear one. The role that we had as the department of transport was to make the arrangements with SkyBus to be the facilitator of the transport service, that when people got off the plane they were escorted to the transport service, in this instance the SkyBus service. The Secretary has detailed to you that SkyBus—I think we all know what SkyBus is—is a well-established transport operator at the airport. They had the facilities at the airport. Once they were escorted to SkyBus, passengers were put on the SkyBus. I understand there were no more than about 10 to 12 passengers per bus to ensure that people were spread out on the bus. They were delivered to whichever accommodation service they were going to, and that was the end of the service provision that was run through SkyBus and that was arranged by the Department of Transport.

Mr D O'BRIEN: There was no security of any sort on the SkyBus?

Ms ALLAN: The issue of security, these were not passengers who—

These were passengers. Let us remember where this started. This was needing to provide very quickly a mechanism to support international arrivals to be able to be accommodated for a 14-day quarantine period. Our role—

Mr D O'BRIEN: Yes, I understand. Minister, do not get me wrong. I am not being critical. I am just wanting to know whether security was on there or not. I am not suggesting that they should have been or otherwise, just wanting to know whether there was or not.

Ms ALLAN: Yes, the point is that these people had just gotten off a plane. So they were given the service, and we tried to make it obviously as smooth as possible, given it would have been a pretty challenging time. International travel is hard enough without getting off a plane and then needing to go through that process. That was the beginning and end of our responsibilities, ensuring that that service was available to international arrivals.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Fair enough. The Premier has been very keen to highlight that ADF were only used, in his words, for transport logistics in other states, which I do not think is actually right. Be that as it may, that has been the Premier's view. Was the ADF ever considered for the transport logistics?

Ms ALLAN: It was not an issue that was brought to my attention. I would have to ask the Secretary to provide additional information. Can I say though that given SkyBus was an available service, one that could be stood up very quickly, and I believe also too that through the process these arrangements were reviewed—I would have to come back to you as to whether it was with the ADF or other appropriate agencies—through the mechanisms that were in place to coordinate this activity at the time. It was seen that SkyBus was an efficient and effective way of delivering this service.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Sure. Minister, given the point you just made—the measures to coordinate the chain of command on this program—did the decisions made at the 27 March meeting by a group of senior public servants come to you as a cabinet minister and to the Crisis Council of Cabinet for ratification?

Ms ALLAN: That decision was relayed to me, as I just indicated to you in an answer previously, by the Secretary.

Mr D O'BRIEN: But did it need to be endorsed by you guys? Because apart from anything else you would have had to provide approval for funding for these arrangements.

Ms ALLAN: These arrangements—and it goes to the very heart of operating a very large transport system—are contractual arrangements. We have contractual arrangements, whether it is with bus operators in metropolitan Melbourne, regional Victoria, school buses, airport buses. These are contractual arrangements that are dealt with on a regular basis by the department. I was briefed on this. It was a verbal briefing. I spoke to the Secretary about it. Approvals were put in place, and that is appropriate for that sort of arrangement, being very much a contractual relationship and an operational relationship between the department as the operator of the transport network and the contractor.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Who was the minister ultimately responsible for the entire hotel quarantine program?

Ms ALLAN: Well, Mr O'Brien, you and your colleagues have canvassed this on multiple occasions during the course of this week. You will know that I have nothing to add to the comments that have been made already over the course of this week on that matter. I have been focused on this—

Mr D O'BRIEN: We have canvassed it, Minister, on a number of occasions. It is a pretty simple question: which minister was responsible? No minister wants to say who it was or seems to be able to say who it was. Can I quote you? Earlier you said you were 'very clear' on your role and responsibilities as a minister and the accountabilities that go with that. So you were very clear on yours—that is fine. I am just trying to find out who the minister is that was responsible for hotel quarantine.

Ms ALLAN: Well, Mr O'Brien, I was working very hard at that time, and I have continued to through this period of time, looking at ensuring that we have safe and effective operation of our transport network and that

we have safe and effective construction sites underway—that has been my focus. I know you have been speculating and inquiring on this during the course of the week, and I have got nothing further to add.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Well, we are only speculating because the government will not give anyone any answers, Minister. Can I go back to the Secretary perhaps? Was the responsibility for the security of the hotel quarantine discussed at the secretary board meeting?

Mr YOUNIS: The operational arrangements for this arrangement were controlled through the State Control Centre. That is where the appropriate conversations were had with the appropriate people. You have got to remember that these are multi-agency responses. It is usual in an emergency situation that we call on the collective information and advice from individuals as well as departments to come to a conclusion. I have been involved in many emergency responses, and it is somewhat simplistic to think that an individual is responsible. It is a multi-agency response in all of those—

Mr D O'BRIEN: Yes, but Secretary, there has got to be a chain of command. Presumably at a secretaries meeting Mr Eccles from DPC would say, 'Right, hotel quarantine' and throw to whomever the secretary is who is responsible for that.

Mr YOUNIS: Well, it is not the secretaries meeting that decides the operational or that has conversations about—

Mr D O'BRIEN: No, I understand that. I am talking about the government's overall response. As you are preparing to brief cabinet this is a fairly fundamental part of the government's response. I am just trying to understand whether the bureaucracy knew exactly who was responsible.

Mr YOUNIS: Well, I think, as I have explained, Mr O'Brien, the arrangements and operational management of this are done through the State Control Centre and that structural arrangement. It is not—

Mr D O'BRIEN: So that would mean that it is under EMV, and therefore—

Mr YOUNIS: by another body. It is something that clearly is reported in the decision-making made in that arrangement.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Okay. Thank you. I will move on. Minister, licence testing resumed across the state on 11 June, and at that time the then minister, Minister Pulford, said they would be hiring 200 new staff to clear the backlog of 100 000 tests. Can you give me an update as to where they have got to—whether those 200 staff were in fact employed, how many of the backlog you got through and how much the backlog is now in terms of licence testing?

Ms ALLAN: Thank you, Mr O'Brien. Look, some of that information we might need to come back to you with in terms of specific numbers of staff and in terms of the exact numbers dealing with, as you described it, the 'backlog'. There is no doubt that with the pandemic stage 3 and stage 4 restrictions and the requirement for our registration licensing staff to have a safe working environment, as well as making sure that there is a safe environment for the tests to be undertaken, we have had to suspend some of those services. That has created a backlog. There is a plan in place, and we are working through that plan to establish additional sites in metropolitan Melbourne and regional Victoria so that when the full program can resume, we can be ready to stand that up as quickly as possible. We have looked though—

Mr D O'BRIEN: Just on that, at what point would that happen? Is that when Melbourne goes back to stage 3 or do you need to wait until stage 2?

Ms ALLAN: We will do that as soon as the Chief Health Officer advises that it is safe to do so. That is the thread. I have just been advised that we have 80 new driver testers undergoing training right now. While we do have an operational plan in place to both train more testers and to establish additional testing sites, the rollout of that in an external way has had to be put on hold because of stage 4 restrictions. But the behind-the-scenes work that can be done safely is being done safely so that when we can resume testing, we will do so as quickly and in as large volumes as we can.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Thank you. The other issue that can be done: we have got, I believe, 45 000 learner drivers waiting to take their tests, and as I understand it that is an online test but as things currently stand has to

be done at a VicRoads office, so it is not happening at all. Have you directed and can you direct VicRoads to enable that test to be available online, particularly for rural and regional Victorians who can still do driver training, so that they can get their learners and actually then start practising in anticipation of being able to get their Ps sometime down the track?

Ms ALLAN: Look, this is something that we can look at. I am just looking for my notes, and perhaps the Secretary or the Head of Transport Services can supplement this. We have already moved a lot of our activity in this registration and licensing area into various online offerings in that way. I might ask, if that is okay with you, Mr O'Brien, the Head of Transport Services, Nick Foa, to address that for you.

Mr D O'BRIEN: I have only got a short amount of time, Mr Foa, so could you just give us a quick explanation as to whether the learners test can be put online so people can do it from home.

Mr FOA: That is something that we are actively investigating, Mr O'Brien. We have moved an over 75 per cent increase in online transactions, and just in the month of July we have seen a 197 per cent increase in online transactions.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Do you have a time frame as to when you might be able to get the learners test online?

Mr FOA: Obviously we are working through the—

The CHAIR: I am sorry to interrupt you there. The member's time has expired. I will pass to Ms Richards, MP.

Ms RICHARDS: Thank you, Minister, and thanks to the officials as well for joining us this morning. I would like to take you to the Big Build and how you are managing that in the context of a global pandemic. Prior to us moving to stage 4 restrictions—can you update us on what COVID-19-related measures were put in place across our major transport infrastructure construction sites? And how did you measure the success of these measures?

Ms ALLAN: Thank you, Ms Richards. There has been a power of work undertaken in this area since the very early days of the pandemic, and I would really like to pay credit to Corey Hannett and the team at the Major Transport Infrastructure Authority, along with our partners in the construction industry, the unions, the workforce and other officials in the Department of Transport, where we have all worked together very, very hard to ensure that the safety of workers is first and foremost in terms of the operation of these worksites and also the role that we can play in slowing the spread of the virus. One of the advantages, if I can put it that way, that we have in the construction sector is there is already a very strong discipline and culture around occupational health and safety. I think it is well understood that the construction industry is a more dangerous industry, and in response to that there is a very, very strong culture that is driven by all the participants in the industry and the workforce and the unions to keep the worksites as safe as they possibly can. So we have had that foundation on which we have been able to add and build our response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and because of that we have been able to put in place additional measures on our worksites. Can I also point out that what we have needed to do on our state government transport construction program differs from site to site. The construction of, say, the Mordialloc freeway as a very large, big outdoor site is very different to, say, the construction of the Merinda station, the removal of the level crossings on the Upfield line, just to name a few, and I will give one to the Member for Gippsland South, the construction of the Princes Highway east as well. They are all very different projects and they all require their own tailored response, and that is what we have been undertaking.

Mr D O'BRIEN: At an extra \$85 million, Minister.

Ms ALLAN: I was waiting. You could not help yourself, could you, Danny! I gave you that opportunity; I am glad you took it up.

Mr D O'BRIEN: An \$85 million blowout because you didn't act.

The CHAIR: Mr O'Brien, you do not have the call.

Ms ALLAN: Unfortunately a little predictable there, the Member for Gippsland South. But look, this is a very important and serious issue, and what we have undertaken is those additional measures that I was referring

to, Ms Richards, before in terms of the additional measures that have also been done in lock step with the advice from the Department of Health and Human Services and the Chief Health Officer as well. So there have been very, very strict rules put in place around physical distancing on our project sites. We have got increased industrial cleaning. There has been from very early days increased provision of personal protective equipment. Again, PPE is nothing new to the construction industry, so having a discipline about the appropriate use of that additional PPE has been something that we have been able to put in place. And in addition to that MTIA, the Major Transport Infrastructure Authority, has a comprehensive pandemic response plan that we have been operationalising across all of our sites, and that is backed up by a squad of safety specialists, a 70-strong squad of safety specialists who have been going across all of our sites checking that these very strong measures that we have put in place are being implemented on the ground and also picking up where they are not and putting in place remedies at each project site level as well. And also, I should add, contractors and unions are also undertaking spot checks on various sites as well.

So it is a result of this huge amount of work and effort in a really strong, collaborative way that has meant that we have seen a very, very small number of cases on our major transport infrastructure sites. Where there have been cases, they have been managed to be contained very, very quickly. As I said, I would really like to acknowledge the work of the workforce and the industry, who have worked very hard to do some really practical things like just staggering shift starts, staggering smoko, putting in extra crib huts so that there is space for smoko to be spread out across the sites, putting additional tools and equipment on sites to reduce the handling of common pieces of equipment and tools, and of course that discipline around maintaining as best as they possibly can the social distancing requirements. And then there is also work that has been undertaken with Incolink to also undertake extensive coronavirus testing across our program as well. So it has been a comprehensive response and one that we continue to do and continue to be very vigilant about.

Ms RICHARDS: Thank you, Minister. I am interested in gaining some insights into how work is continuing in regional Victoria under stage 3 restrictions.

Ms ALLAN: Yes, thank you. For those of us in regional Victoria, we are in stage 3 restrictions and that does have some small differences, and I guess a big difference is when it comes to the delivery of our construction; that can continue in a very similar way that it was able to continue in Melbourne when you were in stage 3 level restrictions. So all of those initiatives that I mentioned before in terms of safe work practices and safe worksites are also in place for our program in regional and rural Victoria, and that is important because we have a lot of projects that are on the go in regional and rural Victoria right now. So we have been able to support the safe operation of those worksites. Also too, importantly, because we have been able to support the safe operation of those worksites we have been able to keep those jobs going. We have been able to keep people engaged and employed in those projects, which is really critically important at this point in time.

I touched on a couple of projects before, but there is a lot of work going on in rural and regional Victoria under these enhanced COVID-safe practices under stage 3 restrictions. So that is why we can see the construction continue of the Avon River bridge as part of the Gippsland line upgrade. And I know many of us were in Lakes Entrance earlier this year, and I was able to go via Stratford and look at the construction of what will be a very impressive piece of infrastructure in that local community. What makes it most impressive though is it means we can run faster, better services on VLocity trains to Bairnsdale, of course a line that a Labor government needed to reopen that had been previously closed. There is also work on upgrading level crossings on the Warrnambool line, making that line safer. Work is going to start on a crossing loop at Boorcan, which will give us the capacity to run extra services—a fifth weekday return service to Warrnambool, something I know the Warrnambool community is very keen to see happen. There is mobilising the worksite at Waurn Ponds as part of our Waurn Ponds station works, again a very busy and growing part of regional Victoria. It is important to provide additional services there as well.

Then one of my favourite projects that is operating under some particularly challenging circumstances is the Echuca-Moama bridge. This is a \$324 million project. I think the committee well knows and I think people well understand that the border restrictions that have been put in place by New South Wales have been particularly challenging for border communities. And given that this is the bridge that straddles the New South Wales and Victorian border, it is a joint project between both governments and the commonwealth as well. A lot of work has gone on to ensure that project can continue, that workers can get from either side of the river, because obviously people live and work on different sides of the river and need to move across. Rosters have been put in place to ensure that crews can be divided between a Victorian team and a New South Wales team,

and that means that we have been able to see that project continue. This is a really big and critically important project for the Echuca community. Providing this much better river crossing will enable the movement of people, goods, services much more easily across the river.

So these are some of the very practical examples of how we been able to keep our projects going whilst at the same time managing some of the challenges of the pandemic.

Ms RICHARDS: Thank you, Minister. Under stage 4 restrictions, so bringing the focus back to some of the major infrastructure projects, I understand that many of them are continuing as usual but some are in a restricted form. I am interested again in gaining some insights into how you determine the different classifications in that context.

Ms ALLAN: Look, again with the introduction of stage 4 restrictions there has been another additional layer of careful thought and interrogation of what we do across all of our individual projects and across the program as a whole. [Zoom dropout]

Sorry, I have got to keep moving the mouse, which is why my screen blacks out from time to time. My apologies. I am back. I just need to nudge the mouse from time to time.

I was talking about how, in addition to those practices that we have in place, we are looking at which of those projects in the metropolitan area can continue and can continue in a safe way and in continuance with strict COVID-19 health and safety protocols, and obviously, as I think I mentioned before, protocols that are worked very carefully through with the Department of Health and Human Services.

We have put in place a range of factors that have been considered in determining which projects should be deemed critical and which projects should be continued under the stage 4 restrictions that are in place in metropolitan Melbourne. Some of those factors include being critical to the state's public health response to COVID-19. Substantial economic or legal impacts are significantly considered as well, making sure that they can be continued in a safe way. They may be projects that have a critical maintenance or safety requirement that they need to continue or have large sites that cannot be demobilised safely or quickly. Or there may be critical equipment that is on site that may fail if there was to be a rapid shutdown of a project site, and the best and starkest example there of course is the Metro Tunnel, where we are really pleased—

The CHAIR: Sorry to interrupt you there, Minister, but the member's time has expired. I will pass the call to Mr David Limbrick, MLC.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Minister, for appearing today. I would like to touch on a few issues. You mentioned the dramatic drop in patronage on public transport. We have this unusual situation now where we have very low utilisation rates on public transport—so we have trains and buses and trams running around all over the place empty—and we also have reduced timetables after curfew, but people still depend on these trains to get to and from work, like essential shift workers. What are you doing to manage this sort of balance that you have got to handle here of ensuring that people can get to work in a satisfactory manner without sitting at the train station for hours but also managing this very, very, very low-utilisation network?

Ms ALLAN: Thank you, Mr Limbrick, for your question. This is an issue we have had to contemplate all the way through this pandemic. Up until very, very recently, with the introduction of stage 4 restrictions in metropolitan Melbourne—and I think you and I discussed this at my last appearance before this committee—we have maintained throughout the period of the pandemic a full suite of public transport services across all different modes of our public transport network. I think we discussed at the time the reasons behind that were to make sure that even with very low patronage numbers it was important to support people who, as I have mentioned I think in previous comments, are going to work in a hospital, in a supermarket setting, in some of those industries that continue to be important for us during this period of time—to be able to get to work. That is why we have maintained the full timetabled services up until very recently.

The adjustment that has been made with the introduction of stage 4 restrictions in metropolitan Melbourne has been in concert with the introduction of the 8.00 pm curfew that has been put in place. It is between 8.00 pm and the last train of the evening on that given day to reduce the numbers of services commensurate with what we would expect to see in the movement of people around Melbourne. I think I gave you a figure before: 8 per cent of normal patronage is what we saw yesterday on a metropolitan train network. Obviously after 8.00 pm,

that number plummets even further. It was considered in order to assist in reducing the movement of people around the community, and that is what stage 4 is; I think that has been said repeatedly. Stage 4 restrictions are really about trying to limit the movement of people. If you limit the movement of people, you limit the spread of the virus. With that, public transport services have a role to play. It was considered appropriate to not cancel all of the services which were after 8.00 pm but to provide a more limited suite of services after 8.00 pm and continue to make sure that people who needed to use the service could use the service. But there has been that reduction in services in line with that reduction in the movement of people.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you, Minister. On that note, on services running after curfew, was there any analysis done on alternative means of transport? Because, as you say, it has an extremely low utilisation rate is it cheaper to just shut it down after curfew and give people, for example, commercial passenger vehicle vouchers or something like this? Was any sort of analysis done like that to see whether it is actually cheaper to do that with these very small numbers of people, and whether it is safer to do that?

Ms ALLAN: I am glad you mentioned safety, Mr Limbrick, because that is actually the key consideration here. It is not so much the cost, and I will come back to that in a sec. It is about how to provide services safely. We have seen the commercial passenger vehicle industry respond really strongly, wanting to continue to provide their service in a safe way. So it was seen as most appropriate. I guess if you see it, after 8 o'clock there is a bit of a mix. There is the reduced public transport offering, and if people are obviously needing a more immediate service, they can choose an alternative, but again, still within that really tight confine of what is allowed after 8 o'clock. There are only a couple of very good, important reasons why people should be moving around after 8 o'clock, and so there remains a suite of public transport services to support that.

In relation to your question of cost, the public transport network, particularly the heavy rail network and the light rail network, they have big fixed costs that regardless of how many timetabled services you may run on a given day, a given week or month, do not go away. There are obviously the staffing costs; there is the infrastructure cost, the number of train sets, the length of track, the safe maintenance of the rolling stock and the track, the maintenance and the operation of the train stations. All of those elements make up the fixed cost of running a public transport network. Yes, there is an additional cost to running additional services, but in the scheme of running the network it is quite a modest additional cost.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you. There has been a point made a number of times during the course of this inquiry about people changing the way that they work and the way that they travel. Even after restrictions are lifted there are people speculating that public transport usage will be significantly lower than it was before the pandemic due to a number of reasons. One might be fear, because people are scared. It might be that a lot of people continue working from home more often—this sort of thing. How does this affect the future viability of the public transport network?

Ms ALLAN: I think it brings even more front of mind the conversation around how people will move around our city and the role that public transport will play. I think I mentioned some of this in response perhaps to Mr Hibbins's questions earlier. We are thinking about, as we get to that point of restrictions being eased, people either coming back into their cars or looking at public transport. We want to give people choices. And certainly we would like—I personally have a view that it would be great—to get more people using public transport services because we know it is a really good and efficient way of moving people around the city and the state.

So we are contemplating this as we have all suddenly gone and worked from home and demonstrated that by and large it can work. Barring the odd technological glitch now and again, it has been demonstrated that for those who can there can be a satisfactory work arrangement put in place for working from home. And so if that becomes more of a feature of people's work and life patterns, yes, then we do need to think about the public transport provision that supports that. It is part of the reason why I mentioned earlier we have added those shoulder-peak services to both spread the peak and spread the load of people but also to give people more choices about whether they want to start or finish their day a little bit later as they move around the city.

I think what we will also see is if more people are working closer to home or indeed working at home their reliance on their local public transport service is going to become very important—and you know buses particularly play a role here. This is where, if I can give a bit of a shout-out to the Suburban Rail Loop—I know that is quite some way off in the distance in terms of its ultimate delivery—that idea of connecting suburbs is

going to be very important, which is what the Suburban Rail Loop is going to do. Connecting the existing trains lines and new stations like in the Monash University precinct and the Deakin University precinct at Burwood is going to provide those suburban connections that we know—particularly in those parts of the city—people are looking for and will take pressure off the road network.

There are a range of factors that are going into our thinking at the moment as to how people start to return to a more regular way of journeying around the city and the state and how we provide transport services that both meet the needs, meet them safely, and also adapt to the changed circumstances.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you. On the topic of safety, there are two issues that I would like to inquire about. One is about the air circulation systems on trains, trams and buses. Has there been any changes to either add filtration systems or stop using recirculated air or any of these sorts of things? I would be interested in that. And secondly it is my understanding that there are not hand sanitiser stations on trams. Could you provide some comments around these two issues please?

Ms ALLAN: Mr Limbrick, I may ask the Head of Transport Services to supplement my response in terms of the hand sanitisation arrangement around trams, because I think I mentioned earlier we are rolling out, I think it was, something like 300 automatic hand sanitiser locations around our train and tram networks. I will ask Mr Foa to add to my comments. He might also have some observations to make about the reticulated air. I have seen some public references to this. I am not aware that it is front of mind for our thinking at the moment, but I am happy for Nick to perhaps add to that if there is anything more to add.

Mr FOA: Thank you, Minister. Thank you for the question, Mr Limbrick. So with Yarra Trams we have a really good rollout of an additional 300 staff across the network doing wipe-downs of high touch points, cleaning of trams across the depots. Every tram every night then undergoes a deep clean. We have also gone into common areas where the trams are housed at the depots and removed things like shared utensils in kitchens and put in a whole range of new guidelines.

We as a department are taking a very, very active role in the assurance of all the cleaning measures, and what we are also doing is making sure that the materials being used are safe and that the safe working procedures are in place. Across the network there are 370 hand sanitiser stations that have been put in place.

Mr LIMBRICK: Are they at the tram stops, for example, rather than on the tram—is that what you are saying?

Mr FOA: Yes, at stops—at a mixture of stops and stations for trains. Also, with the 300 Victorians who are employed on the tram network alone, there is a significantly higher level of sanitisation on the trains. In relation to the reticulated air issue, I will have to take that one on notice, but I understand that our rolling stock division is working all the time on improvements and taking into account international trends in different jurisdictions, so we are absolutely linked into what is going on in other jurisdictions and taking learnings from them. But I would like to take the question of reticulated air on notice.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you. I appreciate it is a technical question. My next question—

The CHAIR: Sorry, Mr Limbrick, your time has expired. I did allow the question to be completed there, given the muting position. The call is now with Ms Ingrid Stitt, MLC.

Ms STITT: Good morning, Minister. I might pick up on where Mr Limbrick left off and ask you a bit about safety on public transport. Obviously there are plenty of people who are not able to work from home under the current restrictions. Given that we have got different restrictions in place in regional Victoria and Melbourne, can you advise the impact of that on the public transport services and how that is being managed?

Ms ALLAN: Yes. Thank you, Ms Stitt, for your question. As I have referenced on a number of occasions this morning, we have had to make a range of changes to the operation of our public transport network in order to both initially respond to the need to ensure our network was as safe as possible for people to use and then more recently respond to the stage 4 restrictions that have been put in place in metropolitan Melbourne. But also too that has presented some challenges in making sure that there is stage 4 in Melbourne, there are stage 3 restrictions in regional Victoria and then we have also had to adjust some of our service delivery to

accommodate the border restrictions that have been put in place by New South Wales and South Australia. So it is a pretty varied landscape in the delivery of transport services.

I think we have talked a lot already this morning about the additional train and tram services in the metropolitan area and the cleaning regime. One of the things that has not changed so much is the delivery of the V/Line services for regional Victoria. There has been an ongoing delivery of our regional services—trains and coaches. However, there have needed to be some adjustments made where those services may have gone over the border. For example, there are a number of V/Line buses that go and service southern New South Wales into places like Deniliquin, Moama and Albury. As a result of some of the restrictions that have been put in place, the V/Line services have had to stop at the New South Wales border, in line with New South Wales border controls, and then there has had to be an adjustment to a different service on the other side of the border should people be wanting to travel further afield.

I should also say that all V/Line coach services have stopped operating in and out of South Australia until further notice. Furthermore, the V/Line train services that have serviced the Albury line, those V/Line train services have been replaced by buses, and buses operate through from Melbourne to Wodonga. Also for example, V/Line runs coach services to Canberra; services to Canberra have also been cancelled. So this has been challenging obviously for people who have wanted to move around the various different states and need to get the permit requirements in place for those if they are journeying into other states.

What we have been focused on during this period of time is working very hard to ensure that those critical public transport services remain available and operational within Victoria and within regional Victoria up to the border. I should also mention too, and acknowledge, that a huge amount of work has been undertaken ensuring that we can continue to run the school bus services. There are a lot of school bus services, again, along the border that service both sides of the river, and there are many kids from New South Wales who come and attend schools in Victoria. So we have had to work through some of those logistical challenges that have been put upon us by the decision for those border restrictions to be put in place. But can I again commend the various bus and coach operators who have worked really well with us to ensure that we can continue to provide these services and provide them safely.

Ms STITT: Thank you, Minister. Obviously taxis provide a pretty important service to people who are unable to use other forms of public transport or unable to drive themselves around. I know that the government recently announced a \$22 million package for the taxi industry, and I am wondering if you can take the committee through the details of that package.

Ms ALLAN: Yes. Thank you, Ms Stitt. I am pleased to have the opportunity to expand a little bit more on that announcement and that package, because again we have spent a lot of time today and on previous occasions talking about trains and trams and the like, but we know that commercial passenger vehicles play a really important role in providing public transport services to the community but particularly to groups in our community. For many of them their local taxi service is their public transport service, and that is particularly true for people with a disability or people with mobility issues—they absolutely rely on the provision of their taxi service.

That issue plus the need to ensure the ongoing viability of the industry is what was behind the decision to establish that advisory group. I mentioned the Member for Oakleigh and a Member for Eastern Victoria, Rod Barton, gave this advice to government on how we can support this industry during the period of the pandemic and beyond and also give advice on some really practical initiatives that can be put in place. So in response to the advice from Mr Dimopoulos and Mr Barton there has been this \$22 million package.

If I can just briefly step through the key initiatives in this package, \$6 million will be provided to subsidise depot fees paid by vehicle owners to booking service providers to ensure that wheelchair-accessible vehicles are available when they are needed—again, really, really important to make sure that we do not just maintain the wheelchair taxi service provision but where possible expand and increase it. It is really, really important, and that is what is behind that initiative. Plus there is also the other initiative of \$1.7 million to double the wheelchair lifting fee for the next three months, again giving providers an additional incentive. They are already pretty incentivised, can I say, to provide this service. If you talk to anyone in the industry who provides wheelchair-accessible services, they are great people and they really love the work they do, but it can be difficult work at times so we are providing that incentive to keep their vehicles operating, because they need to

obviously have specially designed and fitted-out vehicles to provide this service. There is also going to be relief for industry with a refund of the commercial passenger vehicle service levy paid by drivers in the 2019–20 June quarter, putting some funds back into the pockets of drivers who have been experiencing hardship during this period of time.

Another initiative that is focused on the safety of passengers and drivers is that the government will deliver up to \$3.5 million of grants to support the increased cleaning and sanitisation of vehicles across the state. Again making sure that we have got all the measures in place that we possibly can about keeping the vehicle safe, and this comes in addition to some of the things that the population as a whole is doing—for example, the mandatory wearing of masks is a really important part of the passengers and drivers both having a safe vehicle experience.

Then finally there is a million dollars that is going to be invested to establish a regional essential service fund to support the booking service providers in regional communities. I know from some firsthand feedback I had here in Bendigo about some of the challenges that the regional industry is faced with during the pandemic, and that is why those funds are being set aside. So as you can see it is a very targeted, carefully thought through package that is putting the supports to this industry where it is needed the most to maintain its viability in that key service provision in regional and outer suburban areas for people with a disability, people in wheelchairs who rely on the services, and it is also providing some more general relief and support to the industry as a whole.

Ms STITT: Thank you, Minister. We have heard a bit of evidence from you and from your officials today about the importance of cleaning on our public transport network, and it is good to hear that that is going to be continuing to ramp up. My question is: once we get into a better position and restrictions are starting to be lifted, how are we going to ensure that we continue to protect passengers and staff on the public transport network?

Ms ALLAN: Yes, thank you, Ms Stitt. Again, we need to deal with the challenges of the pandemic that are before us, but we also know that we need to plan for the future. We know that transport, particularly public transport, has a really important role to play in providing those services, so we will need to examine really carefully those cleaning arrangements that we have put in place, how they may need to be continued. Also, too, I should reference that, as we continue to work through the ongoing impact of the virus on our community, the advice will be sought and we will be operating within the advice of the Department of Health and Human Services and the Chief Health Officer, and that will be an important feature of how we look at providing additional supports to the transport sector more broadly.

Also, too, one of the issues that in some ways has assisted the ongoing operation of the public transport network is the mandatory wearing of masks. We have seen in other jurisdictions that the mandatory wearing of masks was only a requirement for the public transport network, and that presented some challenges in those jurisdictions internationally. Having the mandatory wearing of masks in place for all Victorians, I think, has been an important step to keeping us all safe, obviously and very importantly, but also to give people the confidence to use the public transport network in a safe way. It will be those broader, universal settings that we will need to contemplate and consider as we look at developing the next range of responses to the pandemic in terms of the operation of our transport network.

Also, too, and this goes to the conversation I was having with Mr Limbrick through his line of questioning, we will need to carefully monitor both patronage numbers but also the different way people will perhaps start to use particularly the public transport but also the road network. That is why we have announced and are putting in place and are rolling out the \$340 million package of road-based initiatives. We are putting in new technology to the network, more CCTV cameras, sequencing of traffic lights—those interventions in the network that will help keep the traffic moving through the suburbs—because we know that as people come through this pandemic people may start to keep closer to home. So we know that our interventions need to be on our road network in the suburbs as much as they need to be on addressing the arterial road network and things like making sure the traffic moves freely through the arterial road network as well.

The CHAIR: Sorry to interrupt you there, Minister, but the member's time for questions has expired. I will give the call to Ms Bridget Vallence, MP.

Ms VALLENCE: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister and departmental staff, for appearing today. First my question is a question on notice to the Head of Transport Services, Mr Foa. Just picking up from Mr O'Brien's questions before, can you please provide a time line for learner drivers online testing to the committee? On notice is fine, thank you. Minister—

The CHAIR: Sorry, Ms Vallence, would the official like to respond to that?

Mr FOA: If I may, that is still absolutely under development. We will be subject to the Chief Health Officer's guidance in that matter and it obviously depends on how Victoria is tracking through this stage 4. We—

Ms VALLENCE: Mr Foa, if you could just provide perhaps the Chief Health Officer's advice and a proposed time line on notice. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Ms Vallence, I think you will find he is advising whether or not he is able to provide that, so if you could give him an opportunity to advise whether or not he is able to provide that, that would be appreciated.

Mr FOA: We certainly do have advice available on the safe operations of driver testing, and I would be able to provide that. But there are so many unknowns right at the moment in terms of a return and to reduce the backlog of driver testing. We did have regional centres available until very recently. Obviously with stage 3 we now—

Ms VALLENCE: Mr Foa, I just want a time line on those, even if it has assumptions. Just a time line on notice, thank you. Minister—

The CHAIR: Ms Vallence, I think you need to be clear. You cannot just demand things on notice that cannot be provided. Mr Foa is advising whether or not he can provide what it is that you are asking for.

Ms VALLENCE: Thank you, Chair. Minister, you have previously confirmed that the government has broken its election commitment to the West Gate Tunnel delivery by 2022. We are now told that it will be by 2023 and potentially as late as 2024. Can you please confirm what the expected date of completion is now?

Ms ALLAN: Well, Ms Vallence, I do not agree with your characterisation of the government's confirmation or otherwise of that, and I will answer this question noting, however, you have not even attempted to make a reference to the terms of reference of this committee or the inquiry or the purpose to which I am being called before this inquiry. But notwithstanding that, for the Chair's benefit and to assist the Chair, despite the fact that the committee member will not adhere to the terms of reference, I will answer. I will address this question. The government has made its position on this project very, very clear, and I think I gave you the same answer when you made this same attempt at the previous hearing, which is that the government has a contract with Transurban. Transurban has a contract with its building partners, John Holland and CPB. We will be holding Transurban to that contract, and that is the position of the government. That has not changed.

Ms VALLENCE: Yes. Thank you, Minister. It is part of the Big Build, which you have talked already about in your earlier responses today and in fact in your presentation, talking about working with your construction partners and how you are dealing with the challenges of keeping construction going through coronavirus. So it is within terms of reference. In the last hearings you provided information to the committee about the tunnel boring process. Can you advise if you or anyone in your department was involved in the development of the tunnel boring machine spoil regulations introduced on 30 June during the coronavirus period?

Ms ALLAN: When you are referring to the tunnel boring machines, we have got a few on the go at the moment. We have got four operating on the Metro Tunnel right now. I assume you are referring to the guidelines that were released by the EPA. I think you mentioned 30 June. And yes, through both the Department of Transport and the Major Transport Infrastructure Authority—

My apologies, the air conditioning has kicked in with gusto here in my electorate office. I am not sure if that is causing any background noise problems for you.

So through the Major Transport Infrastructure Authority and also through the Department of Transport, yes, we were consulted by the Environmental Protection Agency in the development of regulations to do with tunnel boring machine operations and the disposal of soil as a consequence of those operations.

I think that is fairly understandable given that that is the purpose of those regulations and when you consider that we are going to need a lot of tunnel-boring machines into the future, whether it is the North East Link or the Suburban Rail Loop, the work on the Metro Tunnel or the work on the West Gate Tunnel. There is going to be a need for a lot more tunnel-boring activity into the future, and it is important to have a modern regulatory framework that supports that activity. It was in that context that the department was consulted by the Environment Protection Authority. In terms of the policy settings of those regulations, I am afraid that is not a policy that I am the minister responsible for.

Ms VALLENCE: So in terms of—

Ms ALLAN: Sorry, Ms Vallenge, it is actually thundering down with rain at the moment here, and I just cannot quite hear you. So would you mind—

Ms VALLENCE: I will talk loudly.

Ms ALLAN: Thank you.

Ms VALLENCE: As you have mentioned working with your construction partners to keep work going during coronavirus, did you or your office have discussions with contractors of the Melbourne Metro or West Gate Tunnel Project or any other major projects about the potential of landfill levies to be removed for tunnel-boring machine soil before the regulations were made?

Ms ALLAN: Sorry, Ms Vallenge, was your question: did I or my office have discussions with contractors about these specific projects?

Ms VALLENCE: No. Did you have discussions with your contractors specifically about the impediment of landfill levies to keep construction going during the coronavirus period before the regulations were made?

Ms ALLAN: I most certainly did not. For the record, I will indicate to you that I have held forums in which contractors engaged on those projects have participated for the purposes of working through COVID-safe arrangements for the construction program, but beyond that I have not had direct conversations with those contractors in those terms.

Ms VALLENCE: Did you make representations to the environment minister about abolishing the landfill levies as part of the regulations to help your construction partners to continue this work during coronavirus?

Ms ALLAN: No.

Ms VALLENCE: Minister, why is the government giving a big tax-free ride to big corporates—Chinese-owned corporates—to dispose of millions of tonnes of toxic PFAS soil during the COVID period, avoiding them having to pay a single cent in landfill levies?

Ms ALLAN: Your characterisation is completely erroneous and is designed to drive the same divisive politics you attempted at the last hearing. To be clear, international companies engage with our projects and indeed with projects that are jointly funded with the commonwealth government. We have companies from China, from Germany, from Spain and from France who work on our projects. Your characterisation, and the nature that sits behind that characterisation, is getting pretty tiresome and offensive. So let me state for the record that, yes, there are Chinese companies that have some element of Chinese ownership who work on our projects. You know what? They work on projects all over the country—projects that are supported by the federal government, by state Liberal and state Labor governments—so let us just drop for once and for all the characterisation of these projects in those terms, because it is both tiresome and offensive.

Ms VALLENCE: Minister, whilst the Labor government is seeking to increase a 30 per cent landfill levy on households yet is giving big corporates a tax-free ride to dump toxic PFAS soil, millions of tonnes of it, in communities, don't you think that that is not fair for Victorian families?

Ms ALLAN: I think what is not fair is your incorrect characterisation of those regulations that have been put in place, which—can I flag—you and your political party have already indicated that you are going to oppose. Which means you oppose projects like the West Gate Tunnel and like the North East Link Project. I think it is pretty clear that the pattern that has been established by you and your political colleagues—and it sends a very clear message to the construction industry—is that they can go through all the appropriate approval processes, they can go through all the environmental effects statement processes, the appropriate regulatory processes, they can go through all of those processes and have all the approvals in place, but the Liberal Party and the National Party will try and stop these projects to score political points. That is the message that your actions and your line of questioning send to the construction community, and all that does is it adds uncertainty, adds cost and certainly puts at risk the jobs that are involved on those projects. That is the choice that you and your political party have taken. We take a very different approach. We go through the appropriate regulatory processes, we allow the statutory agencies to go through those processes and when those approvals are in place, yes, we proceed with these projects because they are big and important projects for our city and state.

Ms VALLENCE: Minister, on that, in terms of regulatory approvals, can you confirm if any of your construction partners doing this important construction work during COVID have received environmental approval to dump toxic soil?

Ms ALLAN: No, I cannot confirm that, because that is a very broad, sweeping question for which you have provided no evidence or fact basis.

Ms VALLENCE: Well, your construction partners need to get an environmental approval under the new regulations, so it is quite pointed. Have they received environmental approval to proceed?

The CHAIR: Ms Vallence, your question is not within the terms of reference of the inquiry. Simply adding the words, ‘during the coronavirus period’, does not make a question relevant to the terms of this inquiry.

Ms VALLENCE: Chair, the minister quite expressly stated in her opening remarks that she is dealing with the challenges of the COVID pandemic, continuing to support major infrastructure and working with construction partners to keep workers working and jobs getting done, so I think it is well within the bounds of the terms of reference. Minister, can you please describe what impediments there were to genuine community consultation before the regulations were made?

Ms ALLAN: You may have noticed, Ms Vallence, that we are in the midst of a coronavirus pandemic that limits the ability for face-to-face contact. I cannot comment on the consultation processes that were put in place by the EPA as part of the development of the regulations from their point of view, but I can comment on how, through the Major Transport Infrastructure Authority and the Big Build program, we have had to make significant adjustments to our community consultation processes. It does not mean they have stopped or been diminished. We have, in fact, doubled down on our efforts to consult with the community through various online mechanisms and to provide as much opportunity as we possibly can for people to be engaged with our project delivery, and what we have actually seen is more people get involved and have their say because they have been able to be reached by new and different online mechanisms, so I—

The CHAIR: I am sorry to cut you off there, Minister, but the member’s time for questions has expired. I will hand the call to Mr Tim Richardson, MP.

Mr RICHARDSON: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Minister, for your time this morning. I want to take you to the Big Build that is going on across Victoria at the moment and its importance during this phase. Minister, Victoria currently has different restriction levels, stage 4 and stage 3, in Melbourne and regional Victoria respectively. Are you able to advise of the impact of these restrictions on projects?

Ms ALLAN: Thank you, Mr Richardson, and thank you to your assistant for her contribution as well this morning.

Mr D O’BRIEN: She thinks the questions are boring!

Ms ALLAN: Look, it is the challenge of working from home. I am quite familiar with it. It is a delight to have her join us this morning. Look, I touched on a lot of these issues earlier, Mr Richardson, in my contribution to Ms Stitt’s answer, where we have worked very, very hard to ensure that projects can continue

with the differing restrictions in metropolitan Melbourne and regional Victoria. We have also had to factor in issues like the type of project—for example, restrictions and requirements around how you operate a tunnel-boring machine and in fact all four of them that are operating right now 30 metres underground on the Metro Tunnel. It is very different, can I say, to what you might be observing in your local community with the construction of the Mordialloc freeway or the construction of the new train stations at Mentone and Cheltenham. And I talked at length before about some of the challenges we have got with the ongoing operation of the Echuca-Moama bridge project. So there is a huge amount of work that is going into place to tailor our response to those different projects in those different locations.

Mr RICHARDSON: Thank you, Minister, and I will take you down to my neck of the woods: the Mentone and Cheltenham level crossing removals, some 1700 workers working around the clock during those restrictions to get it done and 400 workers on the Mordialloc freeway construction. Can you take us through how the lockdown and the safety measures impacted on those projects?

Ms ALLAN: Look, it was a real credit to the workforce, Mr Richardson, the way they were able to continue on that massive project. I do not have to tell you how massive it was. You got to witness it at very close quarters, where we had 1700 workers working around the clock to remove those level crossings and excavate the 2.1 kilometres of the rail trench along that part of the corridor. I think you have got a big day coming up on Sunday with the opening of the new Cheltenham station. The Mentone station has been open. Look, we did have to put in some changed practices on the worksites—some of the distancing requirements, the staggering of shifts, the additional equipment, the additional cleaning measures. All of those requirements were put in place, and it is a really big credit to the workforce that they were able to continue and continue safely. Also importantly we got to open the line and particularly the Mentone station ahead of time. I think that demonstrates that with the right approach, the right culture, the right set of policies, the oversight, the cooperation and the collaboration of the industry, the unions and the workforce we can continue to operate these big and important projects in a very safe way. We have to be really vigilant about the operation and be very careful about the operation, but it does really go down to the great credit of the workforce for the work that they have done.

Mr RICHARDSON: Thank you. Going up to the north, obviously the removal of four level crossings on the Upfield line is currently underway and subject to stage 4 restrictions. Are you able to advise the committee of the progress of those projects and their adhering to those important new restrictions?

Ms ALLAN: I certainly can. Again this is another terrific example of where the efforts that have been put in place to add in additional requirements to respond to keeping worksites safe through the pandemic have seen the work continue. These worksites are already very carefully planned and executed operations. The work along the Upfield line is a massive job. I know that the Chair has been keeping a very close eye on this for us as well. We have got 1000 people working around the clock until mid-November to remove those four level crossings, to build the two new stations at Coburg and Moreland, to elevate the rail line and to build the open space parkland and walking and cycling connections that are all part of this project. We have also had to work very carefully with the local community. I know that the Member for Pascoe Vale, the Chair, has worked with my office very carefully about supporting the needs of the local community, because now that we have more people at home they are more aware of the construction work that is going on, and so we have had to work very carefully with the local community along that corridor as we undertake the removal of the level crossings along this section of the Upfield line.

Mr RICHARDSON: Thank you, Minister. Obviously it has been critically important to keep the home fires burning during the pandemic. I referenced the completion on the Frankston line, but can you take us a little bit further through the impacts, and given that people are working from home and remotely learning—our kids at school as well—can you advise of the measures that have been implemented to mitigate some of this?

Ms ALLAN: Certainly. It would be good to hear from Corey Hannett, Director-General of MTIA, who can talk in much more detail about some of the additional measures that have been put in place, as you have talked about, with people being at home. I mentioned in my answer to Ms Vallence before about the additional consultation, but I might ask Corey. It would be good for the committee to hear from Corey making a contribution on these points.

Mr HANNETT: Thank you, Minister and Mr Richardson. One of the things that we are, in particular on the jobs, looking at now and putting in place since our discussion with our construction partners last week—

I also should just point out that there have been weekly discussions with the CEOs of these companies for the last four months about what we are doing in particular in the field, so things like COVID wardens, for example—so employing more people to work on the jobs just to have the sole purpose and responsibility of actually being independent of the workforces and just looking for all things to do with COVID across the projects. We have now got temperature testing across the whole program, and we are looking at different types of apps for the workforce to be able to automatically trace the workforce's whereabouts on jobs in a way that helps if we are to get a positive infection; we can actually trace pretty quickly and safely what has actually happened on the job. With all the social distancing rules and processes we have in place, so far we have had a really good run of not actually having an issue where someone has infected someone else.

On top of that we are looking at automatic databases where the workforce, when they come on the projects, can have their details set up and away. We are doing even more proactive testing, we are doing mask testing now on jobs and we are trying to drive up the amount of testing as well—so more proactive testing, more proactive mask testing, which will then lead to the future testing as well, and trying to become automated with the workforce access in egressing the project, understanding their movements in a way where we have got total understanding with having to do it manually if we need to. So it is an ongoing daily thing, and obviously right now there are about I think 7500 people still on the sites and we just have to keep totally on top of it every day of the week, and we will. We are pushing and working hard with our construction partners to actually get more of these things in place. And I think in some of it actually we are leading the way around Australia about how we are doing it. We are also looking internationally at what things are happening overseas as well and we will just keep seeking to do that. But essentially we are a little bit lucky because our sites are spread out, and because they have got a fair amount of area we can actually zone them out and carefully allow the workforce to start and finish in a way that we know how they are working and complying with the relevant guidelines being put out either by WorkSafe or the Building Industry Group.

So, yes, there is an enormous amount of work that we have done but there is also more to do, so anything we can learn from other jurisdictions around the world or anything around Australia or in particular just even sharing information across the companies—we are having dialogue not just with individual companies with us but the whole system as a whole. And then we are also encouraging companies to talk to one another and share their own stuff, even on the sites, on the projects, as well. It is just something that we are going to have to completely and utterly keep our attention on like it has been but continue to do it as best we can.

Mr RICHARDSON: Thanks, Corey. I think I am just about out of time, so I might leave it there. Thanks so much.

The CHAIR: Thank you. And thank you, Minister, and thank you to your officials for appearing before our committee 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.

Before I adjourn this hearing I just would like to address a point of order that was raised by the Deputy Chair this morning. I have via email sought the advice of the Clerk of the Assembly, and I am advised that there is no specific rule requiring me as Chair or indeed any member of any committee to disclose a connection to either a subject matter or a relationship to a witness. That said, I actually have no relationship with the witness yesterday other than as a member of the same government as him. It is his chief of staff who is my husband.

I am also further advised that on the very prescriptive rule that the house has about direct pecuniary interests at standing order 170 is narrowly defined and does not apply in this case. I am also further advised and have considered the *Members of Parliament (Standards) Act 1978*, which refers to conflicts of interest. On reading this section, there is also no requirement for me to declare a conflict of interest yesterday.

Further, the Deputy Chair referred to the PIA. I am also advised that the PIA provides advice direct to members about their circumstances but he does not provide opinions on someone else's circumstances. So the Deputy Chair's point of order that the committee should get advice from the PIA is not necessarily the right approach. It should also be considered, though, that the PIA does have an education function. So he might issue general advice if he is asked for it, but indeed it is up to members to approach him for advice on scenarios, and he does

not make the rules about how the standards Act works. Members have to make their own judgements about what is appropriate for them, and in my judgement this is not the 1950s. In my judgement, to suggest that my husband's role in some way provides a conflict for me is archaic and there was no conflict of interest yesterday.

On that note, we will briefly adjourn this hearing before consideration of the next witness. Thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.

