

# TRANSCRIPT

## PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

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

Melbourne—Tuesday, 19 May 2020

#### 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 Vallenge



**WITNESSES**

Ms Lisa Neville, Minister for the Coordination of Environment, Land, Water and Planning: COVID-19, and Minister for Police and Emergency Services,

Mr Graham Ashton, Chief Commissioner, Victoria Police,

Mr John Bradley, Secretary, Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning,

Ms Rebecca Falkingham, Secretary, Department of Justice and Community Safety, and

Mr Andrew Crisp, Emergency Management Commissioner, Emergency Management Victoria (*all via videoconference*).

**The CHAIR:** We will resume the hearings of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee. I begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting. We pay our respects to them, their culture, their elders past, present and future and elders from other communities who may be here with us today.

Welcome, Minister, and welcome, Commissioner, to the 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. All mobile telephones should now be turned to silent.

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. The hearings may be rebroadcast in compliance with standing order 234. We ask that photographers and camerapersons follow the established media guidelines and the instructions of the Committee secretariat.

Minister, we invite you to make a brief opening statement of no more than 8 minutes. We ask that you state your name, position and organisation represented for broadcasting purposes. This will then be followed by questions from the Committee members relative to their representation at the table. Thank you, Minister.

**Ms NEVILLE:** Thank you very much, and it is good to join you today. I am here in Geelong with the Chief Commissioner, and also in Melbourne we have John Bradley from DELWP as well as Rebecca Falkingham and Andrew Crisp. Andrew Crisp is the Emergency Management Commissioner. They are at different offices in Melbourne.

**Visual presentation.**

**Ms NEVILLE:** If I could just start with the first slide, I thought this was a really interesting way to show, in terms of policing and emergency management, just how dynamic that period was very early on as there was an escalation in relation to COVID. As you can see, there were some significant changes. We acted pretty quickly. The Emergency Management Commissioner appointed a state controller for health back on 1 February, understanding that we were starting to see some issues across the world that were potential issues that we were going to confront. We then moved pretty quickly. On 10 March the pandemic plan was released, on 11 March the State Control Centre went to tier 2, on 16 March we had a state of emergency declared and that was then when particular powers or enforcement powers were enlivened for the Chief Health Officer as well as for Victoria Police.

We had the Police Operations Centre stood up 24 hours, seven days a week. From 20 March we started the process of enforcing the CHO directions. We had the ADF come into the State Control Centre assisting not long after that. We then had the first significant operation by Victoria Police a day later with Operation Sentinel with the 500-police squad put aside, particularly at that stage around the quarantine and the business restrictions. Then we actually moved into the non-essential activities restrictions and travel bans. So it really moved very quickly and directives changed within days of each other, and that was coming out of the national

cabinet and directives were changing and being rewritten. Through that process it is my view that Victoria Police were absolutely agile and moved quickly. Normally when you have legislation changes for Victoria Police you have a process of weeks, if not months, to be able to enact changes and understand enforcement, so they were required, rightly, to move very quickly and I think did that extremely well.

If we then move on to talk a little bit more about specifically, on the next slide, a couple of the particular operations that Victoria Police have been involved in during this period, again, as I said, it was a very fast moving, dynamic situation. The first operation that was set up was Operation Sentinel, which was initially the checks on businesses and people quarantining, where people were required to stay home after they had arrived from overseas. You will see on the slide there that over 47 000 compliance checks have been done by Victoria Police. In fact, as of today, and I do not have today's figures added into that yet, we are close to 48 000 checks now since, I think, 21 March—so significant coverage right across the state by Victoria Police. Operation Sentinel pulled in our public order response teams, some of our high-level teams, but also relied on operational policing. As the demand because of crime reduced we were able to utilise additional police as well.

Just over there you will see the Police Assistance Line. That is actually now nearly at 70 000 calls specifically on COVID, so that gives you a sense of the concern the public had about whether people were complying with COVID restrictions. Overwhelmingly I think people wanted police to have a strong line on this—70 000 shows you that, and that was particularly just before Easter, Easter and in those first few weeks. There were significant numbers every day, and we had to scale up the Police Assistance Line. That has led to 5604 infringements. In my view that is a good measure; that is a good balance between the checks and how many ended up being fined. Just over 1000 were given warnings.

The other operation on there, which we might get to talk a bit more about, was Operation Ribbon, which was in relation to family violence. Those figures are a little bit out of date, and I can update those figures. We have now seen over 3000 checks being done of affected family members, so a significant decision taken by police to ensure that those people most at risk of family violence were checked up on proactively. We are now up to nearly 150 people who have been remanded. These figures are from last Friday, but the last few days have seen the continuation of those checks occurring. So I would say this operation has absolutely saved lives with the work that Victoria Police have done to proactively be out there visiting victims and also perpetrators of family violence.

Just to move onto the next slide in terms of state emergency management arrangements, this is a state of emergency. Again, I think it is the first we have done of a state emergency—a bit like we did with the state of disaster. It is the first time we have done this and used these powers. Once that was enlivened, that state of emergency basically provided opportunities for Victoria Police and powers for Victoria Police and the Chief Health Officer. People may also, given we had a very long summer, be interested to know that the State Control Centre has now been operating for 228 continuous days, starting on 6 October last year. That is a lot of resources, a lot of time and agencies and people who have stood up. Just in the COVID period we have seen that around 6500 shifts have been done, 616 individuals that have been part of that and 18 agencies involved—so significant work there. They have been playing a really important role in Operation Soteria, which is the one for the quarantine arrangements for people coming back from overseas, helping to coordinate that, as have VicPol been involved with that, with over 10 600 passengers now having been quarantined. They have also been involved in the non-health PPE arrangements, providing PPE coordination for all the non-health agencies of government.

If I can just move on quickly, I am aware of the time. If we can show the next slide quickly, just to give you a sense that despite that, despite COVID, we have been able to move into bushfire recovery, and we might get a chance to talk about that during the hearing. Significant work and effort has gone in there. And then of course in terms of my responsibility as the lead Minister for environment, water, land and planning, there has been significant work across the portfolio, helping out entities who have been struggling, particularly supporting Working for Victoria, a lot of work and support to local government. And also one of the big things in the early days, particularly around directives, is how we have supported councils and things like committees of management along our coast and in other areas about how do they comply with the health directives, how do they comply with people turning up at beaches in large numbers, and all of those issues. Again particularly in those very early days all of us were trying to get ready and able to deal with some of the restrictions being put in place. There has also been a lot—

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Minister. Sorry to interrupt you, but the time for presentation has expired.

**Mr MAAS:** Thank you, Minister, for your appearance before the Committee today. Thank you also to the Commissioner and Chief Commissioner for their appearance, and also a big thankyou to the frontline police officers and our emergency services workers, working in extraordinary times under extraordinary pressure. As you just mentioned, Minister, we move on so quickly that we sometimes forget about the bushfires that were on earlier this year, and the significant time and significant efforts which were put into that. Minister, I would like to take you to the topic of the Government's family violence response and particularly your slide about Operation Ribbon. That announcement was made by yourself and the Chief Commissioner in April. Could you talk to us about the response to that and the potential for an increased risk of family violence during the lockdowns?

**Ms NEVILLE:** Yes. Thank you very much, Gary—or Mr Maas, I should say. I meant to mention this: I really appreciate the opportunity that we have got to do this via videoconference. We are in Geelong, where at the moment we have no cases of COVID, which is very good. But I also have immunosuppressant drugs I take, so I really appreciate this opportunity to do it this way.

Family violence, I think it is true to say—and I say this nearly always when we release our crime stats—still remains our biggest law and order issue. Police still right now respond every 6 or 7 minutes to a family violence call-out. It takes up around 40 to 60 per cent of their work. I think we would have said that with family violence we would see a spike in those figures during this period, and that is what we were preparing for. We became quite concerned that in fact we were not seeing that. We were getting your normal family violence call-outs at 6 to 7 minutes—that was occurring—but we were not yet seeing a significant spike or increase in the numbers with family violence.

As a result of that Victoria Police wanted to, I suppose, change—well, they do this now, but really escalate—this model to a new level where they were reaching out proactively to victims and perpetrators of family violence. They were able to tap into the specialist family violence workers that have now been fully funded and released—415 of those—but also, because of the general decline in crime, able to free up other frontline workers and able to get them out doing this proactive work. So significant hours, reaching out, known victims, known perpetrators—you saw some of the figures up there before, and those figures continue to increase. I think what this will show is that this has saved lives and has been an incredibly important program for those people who, because they are in confined spaces, are unable to reach out for assistance. As I said before, 3500 checks have been done, and these are on people who have had a history of being a victim of family violence or a history of being a perpetrator of family violence—so those at really high risk. We know, for example, that if you are a victim of one case of family violence—the more that occurs, the higher that harm and the risk is to that victim. So being able to identify those people most at risk—most at risk of more serious injury and harm and potentially death—was a really important initiative in terms of Operation Ribbon.

**Mr MAAS:** Thank you, Minister. In terms of welfare checks, how are police able to check on victims if they are in lockdown with an abusive partner?

**Ms NEVILLE:** It is probably worth just touching on some of the impacts the police have had. As I mentioned before, over 3500 checks have been done, more victims than perpetrators but both. We have seen about 1900 people who have been visited in person by police. They have also used the phone—over 1800 people have been contacted by phone. We have also used email—so a range of measures, depending on the nature of the risk and the ability to get to someone and enable them to be honest about the situation they are in. Unfortunately in some cases there were women, mainly women, where actually there was evidence that physical harm had been committed, and they were some of the more serious cases. That is why we have seen almost 150 people remanded. We have got 74 people on bail, we have got 55 on summons and around 700 cases that still are being investigated. So even that 150 that are on remand shows you that they are really high-end harm. And again you would have to say what a valuable operation it is that has proven its worth just in those figures and, you know, the ability to really assist women and children who are at risk of really significant harm.

It is worth noting for PAEC that interestingly there are a couple of trends that police have picked up on. Firstly, we are seeing more first-time incidents, so we have picked up on that, as well as more parent-child incidents and incidents between siblings. Interestingly, you could probably put that down to a couple of things: people

being together for much longer than they are used to; often say with the parent-child there is a bit of elder abuse in there as well, but with parent-child often a parent might be sending their kid out to do things and obviously they would stay at home and could not do that. On the other side of that there has also been a report put out by the Australian Centre to Counter Child Exploitation that does suggest some concerning incidents over this period, with more people accessing child exploitation material as well as more people using their own child for sexual encounters. So those issues have been one of the key priorities for Victoria Police as well in this period.

**Mr MAAS:** Thank you, Minister. How are Victoria Police making people aware of the type of support that is available?

**Ms NEVILLE:** Yes. This is again trying to make sure that we are reaching out to people, making sure everyone is absolutely aware that Victoria Police operates 24/7 but some of our agencies also work 24/7 as well. Victoria Police have been doing social media messages and on their website about how people might report, there is advice on the DHHS COVID-19 website as well—so places that people might be able to look at without a partner being aware of it and actually try and find out that information about how to access services. Similarly the Government have also put out a broader campaign, which is the Call it Out campaign, calling on neighbours and friends and other people to also raise these issues if they are concerned in relation to a neighbour or somebody else that they know who may be a victim of family violence, and to reach out.

I think one of the things out of this that the Chief Commissioner and I have had a discussion about is: is there an opportunity to use the Police Assistance Line, particularly online reporting, as a mechanism for people to report family violence where people may be in a risk situation where they may feel they cannot make a phone call, cannot reach out, but could safely use an online capability? That is something that we will have a look at. Our online Police Assistance Line has been used a lot during COVID, and we think there is some potential for that to be able to occur as well.

**Mr MAAS:** Thank you, Minister. I would like to take you to the topic of police enforcement now, and I was hoping you would be able to inform the Committee what Victoria Police's primary role has been during the pandemic.

**Ms NEVILLE:** In some ways Victoria Police continues with their general function of keeping our community safe. They continue to investigate crime, and they particularly remain focused on things like high-harm crimes and youth offending. But because of what appears to be an anecdotally significant decline in crime during this period—and again, we will know that formally when the Crime Statistics Agency data comes out, but just from intelligence from police we have seen a decline in crime—it has meant that we have been able to utilise Victoria Police to be able to ensure they have got the ability to really enforce the Chief Health Officer directives. You know, if we are thinking about those early days, what we were seeing overseas and the importance of being able to send a clear message to people that these directives were critical to the health and wellbeing of our community and to saving lives, Victoria Police have played a really critical role in that.

As I said, something like 48 000 compliance checks—that is an enormous amount of work. They are right across the state. We have utilised police right across the state. I will often find in Geelong, when I am doing my walk, that there are police from Melbourne. Similarly, Melbourne police are in other parts of Victoria. So we have utilised those police officers right across the state. I just want to acknowledge: we have had a state of disaster over summer where police, in unprecedented terms as well, had to do mass evacuations of people across bushfire-affected areas. They had police from Melbourne out in those regional communities doing support, and now they have stepped up and done this and had to do so very quickly. I want to thank them. It has been an incredible effort. It continues to be mass numbers of police doing this. The other bit is that, despite the road toll sitting at 90 today, which is 30 down from last year—still too many, given the drop in traffic; I think we were peak down 40 per cent of traffic on the road—what we are seeing is a couple of really concerning things. One is speeding. It looks like just in terms of infringements et cetera there is an increase in speeding on our roads, taking advantage of really no traffic, red-light camera issues. This has been a big concern, so we remain focused on road enforcement. We have also because of empty roads, particularly at night, had increases in pursuits on the highways as well, which Victoria Police's air wing et cetera have been involved in. So road enforcement remains a really important area of focus, and you know—

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Minister. Sorry to interrupt you there, but the Member's time has expired.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Good morning, Minister and Chief Commissioner. My first question is for the Chief Commissioner. Chief Commissioner, can you just clarify for us in total how many fines Victoria Police have issued to individuals and businesses for breaching the COVID restrictions?

**Chief Comm. ASHTON:** Overall the data from the Fines Victoria database is that 5604 fines have been issued in total. Of those 5604, 165 so far have been paid in full. We have withdrawn or cancelled 337 to date, and at the moment requests for reviews of those fines are at 437. They have included both for people and for businesses, but in relation to businesses themselves there have been 37 fines issued to businesses across the state, and the rest those are for people or populous gatherings.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Next question: Chief Commissioner, can you tell us whether there have been any targets or KPIs set for spot checks, particularly with Operation Sentinel?

**Chief Comm. ASHTON:** No, we have not set any targets in relation to either the amount of checks we want to do or the fines or warnings that have resulted from those checks. It has been a whole new area for us to be involved in, so we have just had to try and use our best judgement in relation to the patrol patterns and what we are responding to. There have been a lot of calls to the Police Assistance Line, early on particularly, particularly through Easter, directing us to potential infringements, and we have been responding to those infringements. It has been more a case of responding to calls, attending those and making judgement calls about whether they constitute offences or not, rather than setting the targets.

**Mr RIORDAN:** So what you are saying is there has been no coordinated checking process between Victoria Police and DHHS? You have just been responding to community-initiated requests, so there has been no sort of orchestrated process for checking people.

**Chief Comm. ASHTON:** No, we get given the directions from the Chief Health Officer, and then the enforcement of those directions is down to Victoria Police in terms of responding and proactively doing patrols to try and determine whether there have been breaches.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Okay. All right. So no sort of coordinated plan on it, then?

**Chief Comm. ASHTON:** Well, only the plan that we get sent the rules by the Chief Health Officer and then we try and enforce them, but there is no sort of meeting that takes place where we say, you know, 'This is how many we got today'. We have on a number of occasions sought clarity because there are literally a million and one scenarios that the community find themselves in. There have been a number of occasions that our Deputy Commissioner Patton, who is the office commander, has gone back to the CHO to seek clarity on so we can understand different rules. That tends to be the only sort of discussion that takes place.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Can you confirm, with the fines and the issuing fines: have you been recording that by location or local government area or some other matrix to sort of get a sense of where the efforts have been put? Is that recorded and is that a public document?

**Chief Comm. ASHTON:** Yes. Well, we certainly have got the ability to know the locations of fines, so we can certainly put that together by LGA if necessary.

**Mr RIORDAN:** So that is available. Would you be able to provide that on notice?

**Chief Comm. ASHTON:** We could put that data together, yes. But would you want it by LGA or by any other geographic—

**Mr RIORDAN:** LGA would be fine, yes. I think it is mainly recorded under that.

**Chief Comm. ASHTON:** And is that just fines or checks?

**Mr RIORDAN:** Fines and checks, please.

**Chief Comm. ASHTON:** Okay.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Chief Commissioner, can you confirm if Victoria Police are required to wait for a health official before entering properties to conduct a COVID-19 social distancing check?

**Chief Comm. ASHTON:** Yes. What we do is if we need to enter a premises, which we have done on a few occasions, we get an authorised officer from DHHS to come along with us because they have the power of entry there under these CHO provisions. We have had occasion where we have not been given access and we felt we needed to get access in order to properly enforce the regulations, and we have called a member of DHHS to come along—an authorised officer—for that purpose.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Has that caused any delays in Victoria Police being able to issue fines or inspect properties?

**Chief Comm. ASHTON:** Only in the context of there is certainly a delay in getting the authorised officer there because it has been in the middle of the night mostly that we have had to do it. But the advice I got was that that delay has not been detrimental to the ultimate actions. One I specifically recall was a very noisy party that was going on and the people inside would not come out, would not answer the door. We did not know how many people were in there, but clearly there was more than a handful and there were a bunch of cars out the front, which was suggesting that there was a range of visitors there. They would not give us access. And then we got an authorised officer out, and then they actually opened the door once they knew we had the power with the authorised officer.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Right. Okay. Commissioner, particularly in the early stages there was quite a lot of public discussion about how we were going about doing fines, and I draw your attention to two examples. In late March a traditional wedding occurred in the northern suburbs of Melbourne with more than 30 attendees, and guests at the wedding have been reported as saying, and I quote:

The cops came and did nothing. They let us continue in groups of five and 1.5 metres apart.

Weeks later a Traralgon couple, Jaz and Garry Mott, were fined the fine—since withdrawn of course—each after sharing a photo on social media of a June 2019 holiday to Lakes Entrance. What rationale would have been operating for the police to have attended a venue and let everyone go but then obviously act on a Facebook post and issue a fine? Could you explain what was going on there, and is that process still in place?

**Chief Comm. ASHTON:** Well, the process in place is that we are following the CHO's directions—Chief Health Officer's directions—in relation to, in that case, weddings. I think in the case you are referring to—in the first case—when we arrived the guests had already dispersed when police arrived there, from memory. But in any case, the police are attending and the discretion we have been trying to apply is that these are normally occasions for great celebration and for families to want to be together, but we are understanding that in the current environment there is at best a health risk to doing that and explaining that to the people. If that is not understood, they are continuing to flout that by understanding and continuing, then they are leaving themselves open to a fine. That has been one of the areas, along with funerals and a whole range of areas that—

**Mr RIORDAN:** But I guess, the contrast with the Facebook. Have you got Victoria Police scanning Facebook posts?

**Chief Comm. ASHTON:** No, I think what that would have been, which has been happening, is people will see things on the internet and then ring the Police Assistance Line or ring the police and we have responded to that.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Chief Commissioner, following the easing of some social distancing restrictions announced on Monday the 11th, a Victoria Police spokesman stated:

Victoria Police recognises there may be some genuine ambiguity from the community and police members alike regarding the interpretation of the new directions ...

Do you agree with the ambiguity issue?

**Chief Comm. ASHTON:** What we found when the first restrictions were introduced, as the Minister alluded to earlier, is when a piece of legislation comes in there is some need to respond to that. There is usually a number of months' lapse where we develop up an e-learning package, which has got to go out to all the members. We rewrite the policy, we introduce a new part of the Victoria Police manual. This has to go through thousands of employees.

**Mr RIORDAN:** But we have all had to respond quickly, so is there enough clarity in place now?

**Chief Comm. ASHTON:** No, what I was saying to you was that because in this case we had to respond quickly, our members had then to make an adjustment about how they were going to enforce something they have never had any involvement in enforcing before. There was I think a lack of clarity for a while in terms of members understanding that discretion and where it needed to sit, so it was out of an abundance of caution and understanding when things eased that you are potentially in another environment where members and the community are unsure, and that is why we get so many calls to the Police Assistance Line, because people want to understand—

**Mr RIORDAN:** So on the ambiguity question—we do not have much time left. My electorate covers the Great Ocean Road region, and it has been a constant source of worry for residents about the amount of young backpackers and overseas tourists who came to Australia before the cut-off dates who are still regularly driving along the Great Ocean Road. The local police in that region tell me there are no clear directions to them on what they are supposed to do with people that have no fixed address, cannot go home and continue to move from town to town. What is the direction from Victoria Police on people that just continue to roam? I thought there was supposed to be a stay-put order in place for overseas travellers.

**Chief Comm. ASHTON:** People are entitled to follow within the rules that are set down by the Chief Health Officer. In relation to the Great Ocean Road and that area we have been conscious in making sure that patrols are dealing with that area, because it is a high spot for tourism. People are allowed to go out but they are not allowed to camp in that sort of environment, and on the weekend we issued infringements on the Great Ocean Road for people that were jumping the barrier there and going into the Twelve Apostles area.

**Mr RIORDAN:** So with people with no fixed address—is a fine suitable for someone with no fixed address?

**The CHAIR:** I am sorry to interrupt there, Chief Commissioner. The Member's time has expired. I will pass to Ms Pauline Richards, MP.

**Ms RICHARDS:** Thank you, Minister, and thank you, Chief Commissioner as well. Of course, like Mr Maas and other Committee members, it is a great opportunity for us to thank our hardworking police officers. I am very conscious of how hard they have been working in the local community where I live, but hearing that data and the evidence you gave as part of your presentation was really extraordinarily compelling but also just showed how hard they are working. So if you could please pass on my appreciation and the appreciation, I am sure, of other members here, Chief Commissioner, to your members. We are very, very grateful, especially coming off those horrendous bushfires.

I am going to continue on with some of the areas of interest that have just been pressed. I am interested, Minister, in whether you can unpack for us how police have used their powers and on-the-spot fines during this time.

**Ms NEVILLE:** Thank you, Ms Richards—a really good question. It particularly gives me an opportunity to just, I suppose, take the Committee—particularly the Member for Polwarth—through again that I do not second-guess the really critical judgement that police officers make every day. Just to have in our heads, there are 16 000 police officers out there moving—if you look at my chart at the beginning—within days to different restrictions whilst under this massive pressure. And I am not sure if the Member for Polwarth was arguing they should enforce fines or not, but 70 000 calls—

**Mr RIORDAN:** No, the Member for Polwarth was saying that the local police had not been given directions, Minister.

**The CHAIR:** Member for Polwarth, you have had your turn.

**Ms NEVILLE:** to the Police Assistance Line, which Victoria Police followed up, including from the Member for Polwarth's electorate and right across my electorate as well, 48 000 checks and 5000 fines—I think that that is a pretty good balance, you would have to say. During a pandemic the police have, you know, saved lives. There is no question in my mind that they have saved lives. That has been their absolute priority. If you are out in the community, in my community, people have loved seeing the presence of Victoria Police right across the state. It has been reassuring. And where they have had to, where there have been blatant—and obvious, at times—people breaching the fine, they have given it. Were there a couple of times where people

might have said, 'My common sense would be that you wouldn't give someone a fine'? Of course there were a few of those, and that is why the Deputy Commissioner moved very quickly to say, 'Let's have a review process', and he sent out a very strong message regularly to people twice a day which was basically saying, 'Think about it from your own family's perspective. Would you expect your own child to get a fine in this?'

If you have a look at the fines, they were released every day, there was a peak period both because people were ringing the Police Assistance Line and people were overwhelmingly saying, 'You need to do more to enforce'. Police were saying, 'We need to get this right' and they did. In my view, overwhelmingly, there is the handful that you wish had not happened, but because of the circumstances the 16 000 operational police officers did an extraordinary job and continue to do so now. I think what we should be doing now is thanking them for doing that and actually saying to them, 'You have done a fantastic job'. They have made some changes now, because again some changes have occurred. This is a constant pressure about people losing their freedoms and how difficult that is and other people wanting freedoms to be lost, and police are in the middle of that. They have used their discretion, they have looked at the directive and when they needed to they have sought advice from the Chief Health Officer around those directives and absolutely have got this right and saved lives, in my view.

**Ms RICHARDS:** Thank you, Minister, for bringing this back to reminding us of how fortunate we are to have them in the service of the whole community. Minister, I am interested in finding out whether police are still issuing fines since the updated Chief Health Officer directions came into force last Tuesday night.

**Ms NEVILLE:** Yes. Look, the fine numbers, you will see, have reduced, and that is what we would expect to happen. For example, yesterday [Zoom dropout]

**Ms VALLENCE:** We have lost the minister.

#### **Hearing suspended.**

**Ms NEVILLE:** I might use this as an example for Sarah Henderson for the NBN connection in Geelong.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Minister. You can continue.

**Ms NEVILLE:** Okay. Thank you. I was answering some questions from Ms Richards about what we are doing currently.

**Ms RICHARDS:** Yes, that is right.

**Ms NEVILLE:** So the fine numbers have absolutely gone down. What the deputy commissioner has put in place is a mechanism where people do check in with a supervisor. That can be done by phone or, depending on if they need to seek any clarity at all, it can be done by summons. So they are still issuing on-the-spot fines. Again, it is really for the blatant and obvious, which really at this point is businesses and really large gatherings given the changes in direction. Obviously as things change at the next stage—I June with restaurants—there will probably be a role for Victoria Police around meeting the 4-square-metre rule, the social distancing, only having 20 people. So they will continue to have a role under a state of emergency. Again, I think they have got the right systems in place to make sure they have got a fair and balanced approach to providing fines.

**Ms RICHARDS:** I am interested, again, in hearing some of your insights into how the Government is supporting Victoria Police to manage the VicPol workforce.

**Ms NEVILLE:** The Chief Commissioner and I talked about this yesterday. Police in a sense are at very high risk of getting COVID—you know, they are out in the community a lot—but they are also spreaders as well. In terms of looking at how we best protect police but also the community, there have been some changes to service delivery that have helped to do both of those things but also things like making sure from our perspective that we have got enough PPE. Victoria Police have had—you might be interested—some substantial increases in use of PPE. In March of last year they would use about 1000 masks; we are now at 46 000 masks a month. So being able to access PPE has been very important.

We have also been able to put in place access to the Hotels for Heroes program. If you remember, we did that initially for health workers but then extended the Hotel for Heroes program, so if Victoria Police members needed to isolate—if they could not be safely with their family, given that they are at heightened risk of exposure with particular activities that they are involved in—then they would have access to that. I think we

have been reminded recently of just what a dangerous job Victoria Police are involved in every day. With COVID that is no different in terms of their ongoing crime intervention work but even the threats that they occasionally get from people wanting to spit on them and attack them with COVID.

Through being able to provide those supports around priority testing, we know about 1800 police have been tested asymptotically, which has been really important, but also there is access if they have had contact—priority to access—as well as, as I have said, Hotels for Heroes and being able to provide them with the PPE they need.

The other, I think, important change to enable police to be able to do the important work they have been doing through the COVID process is the change in regulations for PSOs that we made as well, which has seen some of the PSOs able to be used more flexibly in relation to not just being on stations but actually being out in the community helping with the compliance checks and also importantly around commercial burglary, because we have a lot of buildings and businesses that are closed, empty and much more susceptible to commercial burglaries. We have seen that, compared to some of the other states, our commercial burglary rates are much lower, and also comparatively, based on intelligence, it appears our commercial burglary rate is much lower than it was previously.

**Ms RICHARDS:** Thanks again, Minister. That is a great segue for me to ask about positive outcomes from this new deployment model—using PSOs in that way. What can you see that that might mean for future deployment?

**Ms NEVILLE:** In terms of Operation Shielding, which is what we have set up with the PSOs, we kept 83 stations staffed with PSOs from 6.00 pm until the last train. We have had 25 mobile teams, but because we had a decline in usage on our public transport of 85 to 90 per cent—and that continues now, as of Friday last week it was still down by 85 per cent usage—it is to better utilise those staff. We have seen declines in crimes on our train stations as well. Being able to deploy about 160 PSOs and then also about 50 transit officers as well, we have been able to put them across different Melbourne shopping centres: Bourke Street, Victoria Gardens, central QV. We have been able to put them at Sunshine Plaza, Dandenong main street and Chapel Street but also across regional Victoria as well, so at Geelong we have had them. I can tell you they are so loved; they are loved on our train stations, but they are now loved in our community. People keep talking about the PSOs that are out there—at Knox, at Ballarat. So we have had PSOs utilised to do patrolling of areas where we have got empty shops to prevent those commercial burglaries but also helping with reassurance and compliance checks. They have done over 7000 compliance checks and issued about 110 infringements. They have played a really critical role around crime but also in terms of giving reassurance.

One of the things that we had flagged and is due to come to Parliament is some changes in the legislation that will enable the Chief Commissioner to be able to designate areas where you might be able to use PSOs beyond the train station—so shopping centres et cetera. You would have to say that, whilst still keeping them on train stations when they get back to being busy, that is why we provided an additional sort of mobile squad of PSOs—to be able to use them flexibly, and—

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Minister. Sorry to interrupt you there. The Member's time has expired.

**Mr HIBBINS:** Thank you, Minister and Commissioner, for appearing today. Thank you, Chair. I would like to ask you some questions, firstly in relation to your role as the Minister for the Coordination of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, first of all in terms of the COVID-19 omnibus Bill, which passed Parliament, which included a delay in the introduction of stronger laws for the environment protection agency. The EPA has had more than 18 months to prepare for the commencement of these new laws; obviously COVID came in only a few months ago. Would the EPA have been ready to implement these new laws from 1 July?

**Ms NEVILLE:** Thanks, Mr Hibbins, for that question. I do not think this was a decision taken lightly. It was as a result of feedback from businesses who have to comply. So it is not so much about the EPA being ready but about businesses, many of whom have been really struggling at the moment. Many who have less workforce et cetera had indicated that they did not believe that they could do this appropriately while all they were trying to do was survive and get through this process. So as a result of that there was a decision taken to defer this. The intention is to proclaim a commencement of 1 July. Now, these are laws that I am personally also passionate about. I was in opposition when we committed to a review of the EPA legislation and started

the process. So like Minister D'Ambrosio—we want these things to start, but we have got to do it properly. And really, who predicts a pandemic when you are planning this legislation? So I think this was a sensible approach. It ensures that people are ready and we get the right outcomes. Of course the EPA still have rules and regulations in place now.

**Mr HIBBINS:** So it is not the case that the EPA actually was not ready to implement these new laws?

**Ms NEVILLE:** No, it was not the case that the EPA was not ready. It was as a result of a representation that was made from industry and businesses about their ability to be ready in time, given most of them were just focused on survival.

**Mr HIBBINS:** Thank you, Minister. There have been a number of environmental decisions that the Government are required to make by law. I would like to get an understanding of if in fact these decisions that have been delayed are actually related to COVID. First of all, the Government was due to respond to the 2018 Victorian state of the environment report in March and failed to do so. Was this because of COVID-19? And when can the public expect a response to that report?

**Ms NEVILLE:** Look, I do not have that detail with me. I will take that on notice. I would say, though, if you think about the summer, the figure I gave you about the State Control Centre, and you think about who are the biggest contributors to managing the State Control Centre, particularly during bushfires but after that, it is DELWP staff. So overwhelmingly they are the ones who are staffing the State Control Centre. Does it impact on business as usual? It does; there is no question about that. Other departments contribute as well—justice et cetera—but it is overwhelmingly DELWP. I would suggest that, rightly, a decision was made at that time that we had a state of disaster, we had significant bushfires, bushfire recovery, and I know that that probably more than anything has impacted on DELWP's capacity to just do business as usual.

**Mr HIBBINS:** Thank you, Minister. We will go through some other decisions. The Government was supposed to make announcements about new national parks in Victoria's central west in response to recommendations from Victoria's independent environment assessment council but has failed to do so. Is this not being made in relation to COVID, and when can we expect a response or a decision?

**Ms NEVILLE:** I will get you a bit more on when it is likely, but I would probably go back to my answer just before, Mr Hibbins. We have had an unprecedented bushfire season, as you are aware, and that raises a whole lot of issues. We have got a Federal royal commission going on about bushfires, so DELWP are part of that—massive energy going into that. We have got a pandemic on at the moment. Are people focused on other issues? Yes, I think that is right, but that does not mean those issues you are raising are not important. I think it probably means that there are delays in those rather than them not coming. It is about just making sure that other things that are really important around pandemics, royal commissions, bushfires are priorities at this particular time.

**Mr HIBBINS:** Thank you, Minister. Any further information that can be provided on notice would be helpful.

The Government was meant to agree to 2025 and 2030 emissions reductions targets by 31 March. Has this decision been made, and will the public be provided with details? Has it been delayed because of COVID?

**Ms NEVILLE:** Again, I think we have still got a bit of time, as I understand on the information I have got. I think there are some dates around August that we need to look at, and we have got, I think, something like 10 parliamentary days after a certain time. So I think we are still within the time limit, as far as I am aware, from the information I have got.

There is still a lot of consultation going on. I think that is probably one of the things that has been impacted a bit by COVID, although we are looking at ways how we continue to do that consultation in different mechanisms and we are all learning about that and improving. But it is still moving forward. There will be a target as required, it will be in Parliament and it will be announced; I just cannot give you exactly when. But I do not think we are yet late, as I understand.

**Mr HIBBINS:** Thank you, Minister. On one final decision—the Government’s decision to require coal-fired power stations to install air pollution reduction upgrades—the Government has been sitting on this since late 2019. Has that decision been delayed because of COVID, and when will that decision be made?

**Ms NEVILLE:** Well, again, I said we have a State Control Centre that has been open for 230 consecutive days. Never has that happened in our history. We have never had a state of disaster; we have never had a state of emergency. We have had mass bushfires, bushfire recovery, a royal commission, a pandemic. I think all of the above is why we have not yet done that.

**Mr HIBBINS:** Well then, I guess in response to that, Minister, there have been some decisions that have been made: the Government has been able to make a decision to lift the moratorium on onshore gas drilling and it has been able to sign a new regional forest agreement with the Federal Government to extend logging for another 10 years. Why have there been resources and time available to make those decisions but not the ones that I have gone through previously?

**Ms NEVILLE:** This is always a constant balancing act in these times—what takes up how much resources, who is engaged in the State Control Centre. Part of those decisions are also with the primary industry or agriculture Minister. So, you know, I cannot prejudge why certain ones are made or not, but I imagine it is a constant balancing act about what is possible and what is not possible in unprecedented circumstances.

**Mr HIBBINS:** Thank you, Minister. On Monday the Government announced a small number of jobs undertaking bushfire recovery work in regional Victoria. Can I ask: has new funding be committed to create these jobs or is it the repurposing of existing funding?

**Ms NEVILLE:** All the money in bushfire is all new money.

**Mr HIBBINS:** So it is new money that has been announced. It is not—

**Ms NEVILLE:** Yes.

**Mr HIBBINS:** Thank you, Minister. Part of the plan includes the removal of dangerous trees in our state and national parks. However, quite often it is the trees that have been partially burnt that are actually really important for habitat for endangered species. What controls are being put in place to make sure that trees that are important to native species are not removed under the cover of being dangerous?

**The CHAIR:** Sorry, before you answer, Minister, I will just bring the Member back to the terms of reference of this Inquiry.

**Mr HIBBINS:** Well, I mean, this is a COVID-related announcement.

**The CHAIR:** If you could just phrase your questions in terms of the terms of reference of the Inquiry.

**Mr HIBBINS:** All right. Well, part of the plan that I have referred to, which is the Government announcement of job creation post-COVID, was in relation to the removal of dangerous trees.

**Ms NEVILLE:** I am happy to answer it.

**Mr HIBBINS:** I am satisfied. Thanks.

**Ms NEVILLE:** I am not sure if it was a great question to ask the Minister for emergency services, because right at front and centre of my mind is: how do I prevent the deaths of firefighters? And dangerous trees, hazardous trees, are one of the biggest killers—and we actually saw it during the bushfire season. We lost people as a result of it and we have before, so I want to rely on those people who go out and check whether this tree is likely to cause an ongoing risk to our firefighters as the key determinant of whether a hazardous tree is removed. That is my starting point. Secondly, this is a really good announcement. It is about creating jobs in that local community. This is a community that has lived through—again—a terrible bushfire, perhaps one of the worst in terms of its impact, but also now in COVID is struggling both emotionally and financially, and these jobs will be really important.

**Mr HIBBINS:** Great. Thank you, Minister. Now just in relation to local government, is the Government considering any further support for local government workers that have not been able to secure any further work through government programs and actually support for unemployed council workers or unemployed casual workers, like the Government has provided support to other public sector workers?

**Ms NEVILLE:** Thanks for the question. Look, we have a number of councils that are involved in the Working for Victoria program, and that has been a really important program that has helped those councils that have engaged and wanted to be part of it be involved. We have also just recently yesterday announced some capital programs. I think there are a total of 37 projects out of that infrastructure investment that will help and support local government—capital projects; again, a really important assistance to them in getting jobs in their local community but also that income for local government. Our role is absolutely the public sector; we are a State Government—just like the Federal Government have and just like local government have an obligation to their own workforce. Now, we are happy to work with them on working with the Working for Victoria program and those that are doing it. And I know some of this advice has been provided to them about how they can look at their budgets, as some are doing, and how they are looking at their debt levels—all of those things that the State and Commonwealth Governments are doing. There is work we can do in partnership with local government, but we are not about to start to pay the wages of local council workers.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Minister. The Member's time has expired.

**Mr RICHARDSON:** I will branch out somewhere else for the time being, back on to some of the work on future deployment of PSOs. And from the outset, Minister, obviously there is the outpouring of love and affection for Victoria Police during what has been a really difficult month. We pass on our appreciation to you and the police commissioner and thank you for your time today and the members' work and service. On the future deployment of PSOs, obviously there are a lot of learnings from the COVID-19 response. Will they return to normal duties after the restrictions lift?

**Ms NEVILLE:** Look, this is a regulation change that has been made. As I said, you have got transport down 85 to 90 per cent, and that continues now. We will assess this, and the Chief Commissioner will provide advice to me about those regulations—at what point we might need to go back to the two on the station. At this stage, you know, given we are still working from home, probably my guess would be that people will not flock to public transport for a while. I think people have a fear around—it is safe—large numbers travelling, so we will continue to assess that. But ultimately as we go back to normal, if there is such a thing as a new normal, PSOs will be back on train stations. But we have created a mobile unit and then funded additional PSOs with the intention of being able to have a more flexible arrangement.

The legislation that I mentioned before—that should be in the Parliament when we go back, or close to—will provide some flexibility, with the Chief Commissioner to be able to designate other areas that we might utilise PSOs for. Shopping centres might be one of them. But we may also look at how do we utilise them in these sorts of major disasters as well—where they have worked so well this time, how we can better utilise them in those times. So for example, we can under the counterterrorism legislation use the PSOs. Is there also room to look at that? So I think this has absolutely shown us, and I think if you went out to some of the traders out in those areas where they have had PSOs during this time, they have absolutely loved it. It has made such a big difference to crime rates in those areas and prevention of crime in those areas. They are keen to see Victoria Police able to utilise the PSOs in a more flexible way, and that is what the legislation that will come to Parliament will enable us to do and we have publicly committed to that.

**Mr RICHARDSON:** We have seen a change in various services and the routine work of Victoria Police during this time. I am wondering if you could comment on the community's perception of whether there is less safety or a less safe environment from those reductions—what operationally, and what in practice, that has meant with the changes in work arrangements.

**Ms NEVILLE:** Yes. So again, as I mentioned before, police members are both at high risk of getting COVID but are also high spreaders of COVID, given the frontline role that they play and the numbers of people that they see and connect with every day. So there were some changes that were made to the service delivery model, both as a result of that but also because we were seeing substantial changes in people going to police stations, people seeking police assistance and of course, as I mentioned before, around crime. Again, the crime stats agency puts out crime stats and collates all of that, so all I am giving you is the intelligence from

police, but particularly in those high-volume crimes—from theft, the assaults because less people are out on the streets—in all of those figures we have seen substantial declines in crime. So police have been able to utilise and make some decisions around their service delivery that both provides protection and safety to people in terms of their health and wellbeing by closing police counters and changing some of their processes, but have also then been able to utilise those police in a much more proactive way. There are heaps more patrols out there. I think it has been great for the community, but also police officers, I think, have also enjoyed that opportunity to not just be doing van work but actually be out there and engaging with the community, providing that reassurance, talking to people.

So I think the changes have not resulted in any way in any less safety—in fact much more safety. There is no question that people feel safer when they see police in their streets and in their communities. This has seen, probably more than ever, the amount of police on our streets and in our communities has been extensive, and people have really appreciated it. I think one of the things in the funding of various things like mobile technology et cetera for Victoria Police, that is all about how do you change the service model so you have more police out on the streets? How do you get them from behind the desk doing paperwork? The mobile technology is all about that, but also the increase in police numbers is all about that. So I think Victorians will have seen what we are hoping to get to in an ongoing way over this COVID period and will I think be expecting to continue to see that, and hopefully that is what we will be able to continue to deliver to the community.

**Mr RICHARDSON:** Great. Minister, if I could take you to the emergency management arrangements and actions, and obviously with the State Control Centre being up and running for nearly 230 days it has been an extraordinary toll on our emergency services, but the work and their coordination has been outstanding. Minister, how is the Government using effective emergency response governance and coordination to support Victorians during the COVID crisis?

**Ms NEVILLE:** As I mentioned and as you pointed out, 228 days consecutively of the State Control Centre, but what sits under that is some pretty formalised emergency management arrangements that sit both with the emergency management commissioner and me in terms of various responsibilities. On 1 February Andrew Crisp appointed the first state controller for health, being very alert and aware of what was happening internationally and the fact that we needed to make sure all our agencies and across Government we were prepared and ready. So that was from 1 February. You will remember we were still sort of dealing with bushfires then, so we acted very early in relation to that. Then on 11 March we moved into tier 2 for the State Control Centre. Tier 3 is the highest. That determines how many people are there, how many people are working out. So we escalated it to tier 2, and then from 2 April it has been operating 24 hours, seven days a week. It is really where a lot of the planning, the intelligence, the coordination between government agencies is undertaken and really an assurance process to make sure that all the control arrangements are working properly, all the systems are working properly. All the agencies need to assure the emergency management commissioner of those arrangements so we are well prepared and we are responding appropriately to a particular emergency.

In the declaration of a state of emergency the Act requires both the advice from the Chief Health Officer and then that the Minister writes to both myself and the emergency management commissioner and seeks our support and our advice about whether a state of emergency should be applied, and in this case we absolutely supported that and did so on the grounds of a number of reasons: the number of people who at that point could be affected, the fact that we needed some enforcement powers and ability to ensure directives could be issued and followed and complied with. The seriousness of the threat was weighed up. This disease, this virus, is incredibly serious and would have had a huge threat to life and to our community if we had not put in those constraints we had. The scale of it, the effect of the harm—we weighed all of that up in order to determine that we supported the state of emergency being first enacted and then have done so in each of the two other extensions of the state of emergency. Of course it is based on the advice of the Chief Health Officer, but we need to bring our advice to that as well.

So the State Control Centre, and Andrew as well, has been a really important part of a number of operations. I talked a little bit before about PPE as something that is being assisted through the State Control Centre, making sure that for all our non-health agencies we know what their demand is—we prioritise who should get it, the distribution—and have we got enough stockpiling. Andrew and the State Control Centre have played a significant role in that. And of course, with the Operation Soteria, which is the quarantine from all our overseas travellers, Andrew Crisp appointed a deputy health coordinator whose sole role is to manage that, and that has

been an extraordinary operation—over 10 600 people have been in quarantine during that period—managing food relief, managing mental health issues. Police have played a massive role meeting everyone at the airport as they arrive, and obviously there is security that is provided at those hotels, but also Victoria Police are there if there are any incidents. So State Control Centre has really been there, and the emergency management arrangements that we have in Victoria are there to make sure that we are very early prepared and able to best respond and then will be playing a significant role in the recovery process, which will be a long process in terms of both economic recovery and all the other challenges that COVID has put in play in front of us.

**Mr RICHARDSON:** You mentioned there, Minister, the State Control Centre and the work that they have done during Operation Soteria. There has also been, as we have seen in media reports, the involvement of the Australian Defence Force in these efforts. I am wondering if you could take the Committee through that coordination work as well.

**Ms NEVILLE:** People will recall that the Commonwealth Government announced that the defence force could and would play a role. We went through a process. We have a very strong relationship with the defence force. They were really embedded and part of the State Control Centre during the bushfire period. Basically the same people are back there now as part of the COVID response. So we have that. We worked through with them about the most appropriate role they could play in terms of supporting the COVID response from the State Government, and I want to thank them for that. Since 22 March—

**The CHAIR:** Sorry to interrupt you, Minister. The Member's time has expired.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Chief Commissioner, can I just go back. You mentioned 337 fines had been withdrawn or cancelled. Can I just ask: have all of these withdrawals been completed and can you just advise us whether anyone has actually paid or been reissued a now invalid fine?

**Chief Comm. ASHTON:** The fines, just to differentiate, they were not invalid; they were withdrawn through the Fines Victoria review process. But in those cases, in relation to the fines, the numbers we had were the 337 withdrawn. We in Victoria Police initially took an approach where we had some ambiguity on discretion to Deputy Commissioner Patton, who withdrew about nine that he went through. He thought that the better discretion should have been applied there, and he took that actively to withdraw those. The rest have been through the formal review process that people have requested. They are in the process at the moment of being withdrawn. I do not have the exact number of how many people have been contacted to say that theirs has been withdrawn yet, because that information is with Fines Victoria.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Are you aware of any that have been reissued?

**Chief Comm. ASHTON:** That were previously withdrawn, do you mean?

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Yes.

**Chief Comm. ASHTON:** No. I do not believe any have been reissued.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Minister, can I just go back to PSOs briefly. So if I heard you right, you said you would be bringing in legislation to expand the role of PSOs beyond the train system. Can you guarantee to the Committee and the community that there will still be two PSOs on all the stations from 6.00 pm until the last train?

**Ms NEVILLE:** Yes. I would just say when we get public transport back operating.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Yes, and you gave an idea. Can I just clarify too, I thought you said 160 PSOs had been redistributed.

**Ms NEVILLE:** Well, 160 is the minimum—sometimes a little bit more—so, yes, about that. It is about 30 per cent.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** And 50 transit officers as well?

**Ms NEVILLE:** Yes.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Minister, on whose advice did you make the decision to temporarily ban the sale of firearms and ammunition?

**Ms NEVILLE:** Well, it is not my decision. It was a decision of the Chief Commissioner. I am very happy, though, to address the issue. So, firstly, let us put it in context. You could not hunt, so you were not allowed to hunt. You had to stay home. You could not do non-essential travel. There was no recreational hunting or shooting allowed.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Well, there was, Minister, for control of wild—

**The CHAIR:** Mr O'Brien, let the Minister answer the question.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** There was, Minister, for control of pest animals on farms, for the record.

**Ms NEVILLE:** Yes, and that was allowed. So farmers could continue—this was only in relation to recreational shooters.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** And recreational shooters as well.

**Ms NEVILLE:** It was not anyone who could have it for pest control or professional shooters. It was only in relation to recreational. In a period we were seeing a 100 per cent increase in permits to acquire in a situation where you could not hunt—were not allowed to hunt. So were there concerns? There was concern about that in relation to firearms. There was quite a significant deliberation at national cabinet about this that resulted in three states making a decision to do that. That was Victoria, Queensland and WA. Of course you now know that as things have settled and you can hunt, that directive from the Chief Commissioner has now been withdrawn. Why are we worried about a 100 per cent increase? For one, we would have to be concerned in a scenario like this where you have got stockpiling. You have got police officers who are being directed to do other things, who are not able to do the same amount of checks on firearms—about whether they are stored properly et cetera. So in terms of a broader community safety piece, it was an appropriate decision.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Minister, you said at the time that it was a decision of national cabinet, and you have just referred to that again, but on 21 April the *Age* reported that there was no collective decision by national cabinet on this.

**Ms NEVILLE:** I never said there was a decision. I said there were deliberations by national cabinet about this trend that was happening nationally and it was left to each state to determine their direction. As a result of those deliberations, as a result of the figures that were before us—a 100 per cent increase in permits to acquire—and the fact that there was no hunting allowed, so it was not explainable about why you would have a 100 per cent increase, a decision was made on the basis for community safety for both the firearm owners as well as the broader community, as well as the fact that we had police that were not able to do the sorts of checks they would normally do on firearm owners and storage.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Do you understand that your decision and some of the language you used in announcing it would have made law-abiding firearm owners feel like they had been victimised in this?

**Ms NEVILLE:** Look, I saw some of that feedback from some of them, but let me be clear: most firearm owners do the right thing, absolutely. There is no question about it. Do people with firearms undertake family violence? They do, as do the rest of the community. They are no more likely and no less likely. But there is no question that all the research shows us that having a firearm is a risk indicator. I am not saying every firearm owner is a family violence perpetrator, but some are, and every year we take people's licences off them because they are a family violence perpetrator. So firearms is a risk factor for harm, and it is a significant risk factor. In fact I think the third highest cause of injury in family violence is where someone has a firearm. So it is not insignificant. But of course most firearm owners are absolutely law-abiding, good citizens who do not perpetrate family violence, but some do.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Chief Commissioner, can I ask how many fines have been issued to forest protesters who have illegally entered timber harvesting safety zones?

**The CHAIR:** Mr O'Brien, in the context of the terms of reference of the Inquiry?

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** In the context of COVID-19, Chair. Fines for—

**Ms VALLENCE:** Non-essential travel.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Yes. Thank you.

**Chief Comm. ASHTON:** What I will do is I will include that with the breakdown of fines issued by LGA data that I am providing on notice. I will include that for you.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** You do not have that available at the moment?

**Chief Comm. ASHTON:** I am not aware of us having had any, but we will go through and see whether we have.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Well, for the record the agriculture Minister tweeted last week that several on-the-spot fines of \$1650 had been given to protesters for breaching the directive. So I would assume, if she is right, that there are some. You do not have that information in front of you?

**Chief Comm. ASHTON:** No, I do not remember ever seeing that on the lists, but I will go back and look for it.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Okay. Likewise, have any fines been issued to protesters protesting against duck season?

**Chief Comm. ASHTON:** Protesting against duck season—no, not at this stage. We had on the weekend the first weekend where we have had, sort of, duck shooting taking place under the easing of the restrictions, and over the weekend no fines were issued to any protesters.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** If someone was out protesting—

**Ms NEVILLE:** They in fact were not breaching, Mr O'Brien. According to the Chief Health Officer people can protest in groups of 10 and, as I understand, that is exactly what happened.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** What section of the directions is that under, Minister?

**Ms NEVILLE:** The police, because it was duck hunting season, went and spoke to the Chief Health Officer, who said groups of 10 can be together. As you know, people can hang out in groups of 10 outside. That is under the directives. So that includes if you want to protest. If that is your recreation and that is your outdoor activity, there are no limits on those outdoor activities provided under the directive. So people in groups of 10, they can legitimately protest. We have got a protest coming up against directives tomorrow, I think. If people turn up with more than 10 people, they will get a fine.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** How does that fit with the five reasons to be outside your home? It is not recreation, it is not exercise.

**Ms NEVILLE:** We do not make the directives, the Chief Health Officer does, and the Chief Health Officer has said people can hang out in groups of 10, including to protest.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Okay. Chief Commissioner, how many reports of breaches of COVID-19 restrictions have been made to the Police Assistance Line since the declaration of the state of emergency?

**Chief Comm. ASHTON:** I have got those numbers, if you just bear with me for a sec.

**Ms NEVILLE:** I think I had them on the slide.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** That might be calls, I think, Minister.

**Ms NEVILLE:** It was on my slide, that's all.

**Chief Comm. ASHTON:** I will give you all the data here, which is as at 17 May. So we had 69 286 calls. In relation to reporting isolation breaches to us, there were 4907; in relation to business breaches, people reported to us 4722; in relation to prohibited gatherings, there were 20 755 calls. We referred 8267 calls to ESTA

because they actually related more to serious safety issues that would warrant a priority 1 call, so there were 8267 of those. And there were 38 902 matters that were people wanting to understand what the rules were as they applied to them or to people around them or to neighbours, wanting to understand the rules. And there were 7534 inquiries received over the online reporting system through that same period.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Chief Commissioner, just in the brief time I have got left, are you able to tell us how many fines were actually issued as a result of that first lot of calls that you mentioned, reports of breaches of isolation or business or gatherings?

**Chief Comm. ASHTON:** Yes. Well, that was that information provided, I guess, at the start where we had all those calls. In addition to those of course we have had our spot checks and that, which have led also to fines. So we have had, in relation to the spot check fines—

**The CHAIR:** Sorry to interrupt you, Chief Commissioner, but the Member's time has expired.

**Ms STITT:** Thank you, Minister and Chief Commissioner and your other officials with you today. And thank you for the incredible work that you have been overseeing over the last few months and continue to do. Minister, you touched briefly on personal protective equipment, but I wanted to go back to that issue, because obviously ensuring sufficient levels of PPE and clothing is a major logistical undertaking. I wanted to give you the opportunity to take the Committee through in a bit more detail how the Government has been able to achieve adequate PPE and equipment.

**Ms NEVILLE:** Thank you, Ms Stitt, for that. One of the early things that the Emergency Management Commissioner did when it became clear that demand for PPE was just growing from all our different agencies—beyond health; of course health had a different supply mechanism—was to set up a combined agencies operation group, and this was to try and bring together the various departments and look at planning and logistics around this. So since 25 March Emergency Management Victoria has facilitated the sharing of PPE across non-health areas and procured \$4.2 million in PPE. So 1.4 million single-use gloves have been sourced, 20 000 surgical masks and 61 000 P2 masks, 130 000 litres of hand sanitiser, 2800 canisters of surface wipes and 41 400 protective disposable coveralls have been sourced by Emergency Management Victoria through that process and then they enabled that to be passed on to different departments and agencies that required it. So they have been distributing significant numbers to Ambulance Victoria—something like 10 000 bottles of hand sanitiser to Ambulance Victoria, 19 000 P2 masks to Ambulance Victoria. In terms of the MFB, the fire brigade: 960 bottles of 500 millilitre hand sanitiser, 1000 P2 masks and 11 000 protective disposable coveralls.

If you remember our fire services, the MFB but also some of the CFA, do emergency medical response so will be often first on scene to a major emergency, doing CPR et cetera. So for our fire services we needed to source significant PPE. Victoria Police have their own sources as well, but they have also received additional assistance with hand sanitiser—over 3800 bottles of that and 7000 P2 masks. The CFA have had over 3800 by 500 millilitres of hand sanitiser. The Victoria State Emergency Service—and I want to give a bit of a shout-out to the SES because during all of this COVID and in fact during the bushfires as well, where they were helping, we have had massive call-outs around floods and storm events, so they have continued to do that. We have been able to source about 8000 gloves for them and 2200 masks for them. DELWP has also not yet reported any shortages of PPE, but DELWP is part of that process to make sure any of their staff have access to PPE and that we are ahead of the need. We are trying to order and get in enough before we know we have got a need.

So at the moment EMV have been able to distribute to DELWP, to the Department of Transport, and Health and Human Services in terms of Operation Soteria, not for health workers, and the Victorian Institute of Forensic Medicine. We have been doing local government sourcing as well—maternal and child health particularly—and ESTA, the Emergency Services Telecommunications Authority. This has enabled departments to keep doing the critical work they do, particularly that work that is front line. These are many workers who cannot work from home so are much more vulnerable. It has been a really big part of the work that Andrew Crisp has been leading and that Emergency Management Victoria have been doing during this period.

**Ms STITT:** A massive effort. Minister, how has that work ensured that we have kept our emergency services workers safe, and are there any other initiatives that the Government has taken in that regard?

**Ms NEVILLE:** Yes. I think really early on as we first started to look at—from 1 February, when a state controller was appointed, a lot of work went into all our emergency services agencies to make sure they had pandemic plans, they had a pretty clear idea of what their business-as-usual processes would be and how many people they could afford to lose in terms of if they contracted COVID. So all of that work was done very, very early on, and a number of those things were then able to be ready and put in place if necessary. So how much absenteeism could they deal with? All of that work was done through Emergency Management Victoria. There were pandemic management teams set up. In fact Andrew Crisp continues to chair and bring together the chiefs of all those agencies on a fortnightly basis to make sure that each agency is managing under the COVID arrangements, how their staff are looking, what systems are in place if anyone contracts COVID whilst at work et cetera. So we had some, in the early days particularly, people who had returned from overseas where staff had to quarantine. All of those systems were in place—as well as, of course, for volunteers.

We had the Hotels for Heroes system put in place. This was initially for health workers but then extended to firefighters, to Victoria Police members and other justice workers as well—so again trying to make sure that people had a safe place to go to protect their families while they had to self-isolate.

So these have been really important initiatives that have been put in place to try and manage what are unprecedented times and potential risks. If you think back to March–April and the level of concern about: could we get on top of the curve, being ready and able and having confidence our agencies could continue to provide services. Because of course during this period we need our firefighters to turn out, we obviously need our Victoria Police members to turn out and our SESs to turn out.

So to just give you a sense during COVID of what this has meant for our workforce, the CFA have responded to over 8000 incidents during that period—during the COVID period since March. We have had the MFB respond to 8000 incidents and the Vic SES to 5200 requests for assistance—so they are absolutely still doing the jobs we need them to do, and all those issues continue regardless of COVID.

**Ms STITT:** Thank you, Minister. Can I now ask you a little bit about the bushfire recovery program and how that has interacted with the COVID-19 restrictions. Can you explain what actions the Government is taking to support bushfire-impacted communities following the devastating bushfires and obviously coinciding with the pandemic?

**Ms NEVILLE:** Yes. I just cannot understate what an impact this has been on those communities—to have lived through devastating fires. It is loss of property but also the trauma that has been associated with these fires. There are seasoned people who have always defended their properties who tell you they would never do it again given the nature of these fires. And then to almost just see a little bit of hope, particularly for business—we were encouraging people to travel to East Gippsland and to the north-east—and then for that to be so undermined by COVID, for these circumstances the impact is significant. The impact I think in that community will be long term, and this will be something we need to support financially and mental health-wise and emotionally as well as all the physical recovery.

So despite the changes that we have had to make around how some of the interaction with the community has occurred, there has been significant progress being made. If we have a look at the clean-up, for example, I think I had some figures on the slide that we looked at briefly, but as of yesterday we have had now 213 properties cleaned up out of 732. It is moving at quite a significant rate now. Many communities will be completed by the end of July, all done by the end of August. I know that there has been some frustration in those communities about a sense of, ‘When is it going to happen?’. It is now fully underway. About 53 per cent of those are local content now, which is important, creating some jobs in those local communities. But we have also been able to set up eight community hubs, all of which are set up, and two that will be done by the end of May.

We have also got our community recovery committees. Some of those are already operating. Some, like the Mallacoota one, wanted to have elections—which of course has been challenging, those elections for their community recovery committee. By about mid-June all our community recovery committees will be set up. Each of those communities have a staff member now allocated—a local person that has been employed to help in the recovery process. We have got I think it is 1051 cases that are being assisted through the case support system. We have got money out to small business and primary producers. But of course we are going to need to really reassess that in light of COVID for many of those businesses. It is going to be a hard road back for many,

particularly given tourism is one of the ones affected now, but in terms of ongoing, the impact on those small businesses will be significant.

I think it is somewhere around \$316 million we have currently committed to bushfire recovery. About \$73 million has been paid out in various grants at the moment, and of course as we go through with community recovery, communities' identification of key priorities, that will see us invest in some of that infrastructure and services that those communities need. But we cannot underestimate the impact that COVID has added to the stress and the pressure of those communities.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Minister. The Member's time has expired. I will pass to Mr David Limbrick, MLC.

**Mr LIMBRICK:** Thank you, Minister and Chief Commissioner, for appearing today. I wanted to touch on something that you mentioned in your presentation—and also got part way through explaining before but got cut off—about the ADF personnel being embedded in the State Control Centre. Can you give some indication of what the military involvement actually is in the State Control Centre and what sort of activities they do?

**Ms NEVILLE:** Yes. The ADF have played two roles actually, Mr Limbrick, with us. One is that they have assisted a little bit with the Police Assistance Line, because we had such a massive uptake they assisted us there with some of the assessments on the phone calls; secondly, at the State Control Centre, as I mentioned before, and particularly around planning and logistics. Their skill is really in logistics. I might get Andrew Crisp, the Emergency Management Commissioner, to really give you a flavour for that. But if I think how we have used them in bushfires and how we got people out of Mallacoota, they did all of the logistics, so that is what they are really good at. Are you happy for me to just get Andrew Crisp, the Commissioner, to just take you through it in a bit more detail around their work there?

**Mr LIMBRICK:** Yes, that is fine.

**Mr CRISP:** Yes. Thanks very much, Minister. I guess I can use a specific example. As you mentioned, Minister, on 1 February when a state controller was appointed we started to look at all of our existing plans. One plan in particular was in relation to mortuary and mass casualty, so again no-one had actually looked at this plan for quite some time. It was a really good piece of work in pulling together government departments, but the ADF provided significant planning and logistical support in relation to how, in terms of an end-to-end process, we could further refine that particular plan. They played a key role in relation to that mass casualty plan.

There have been quite a few mentions of Op Soteria. We had 36 hours from coming out of the national cabinet announcement by the PM to set up that particular operation. Again we had the ADF in the State Control Centre at that stage, we sat down with them and we were able to work together to quickly develop a plan in relation to how we would start to receive the first of those people from 29 March. They continued in relation to the support of Op Soteria when, as the Minister mentioned, we appointed a deputy state controller that sat over that operation. It has transitioned more into business as usual now within DHHS, working with other agencies and departments, but they have set up their own emergency operations centre down at Fitzroy. We still have the ADF embedded there as they are working through a range of standard operating procedures in relation to how they will work within the operation, but we know that this operation has still got quite some time to go, so we are using the opportunity to really fine-tune those plans.

**Mr LIMBRICK:** Mr Crisp, it is also my understanding that as well as logistics military personnel are also used for contact tracing. How are those personnel actually used, and what military systems do they actually have access to to take part in that, or do they just use civilian systems?

**Mr CRISP:** You are exactly right; they were used for contact tracing. It was basically that they were given a script and they were on the phones—it is basically a massive call centre where through DHHS they were ringing various people that might have been in contact with confirmed cases, so there was no access to military systems around that whatsoever.

**Mr LIMBRICK:** Thank you, Mr Crisp. I have another question for Commissioner Ashton if you would not mind, please. Before we spoke about the idea of all the fines being reviewed by police; could the Commissioner

please give us some indication of what the decision process is through which that review is undertaken, so what are the things that are considered when deciding whether to withdraw a fine or not?

**Chief Comm. ASHTON:** Most of that work is undertaken through Fines Victoria through their review mechanism. How that normally works is in the road policing space, so they are doing reviews of road policing fines. In this case those fines come in and they are logging that through what we call the traffic book, which is where the codes are written in when they come through. These COVID fines go through that same process, so they firstly check if the fine is technically correct. All of the paperwork has to be correct. If there are any errors on that paperwork, generally that fine is withdrawn, because when it gets to court it will not be found to have been accurately issued. The other main issue that they also look at is fairness from the point of view of where they think the courts will land on any review. They have a good idea of where the court sets the bar, and so when they go through it they can then immediately see, 'Oh, this particular fine's not going to go through any sort of court review process satisfactorily' where the courts would see where the officers placed the discretion. That tends to be the other area.

Also there are other processes that we can have in place. For example, in this case with COVID our deputy commissioner publicly undertook, because there were community concerns—we had a fairly publicised case of a learner driver which prompted a lot of media attention and the deputy commissioner indicated that he would personally step through them every day, and if he saw any that were obviously a poor use of that discretion then he would do that himself, and of course he can do that also as part of that process. And he did that in about seven or eight or nine cases where he saw those and withdrew them. But most of them, the vast majority of those, have gone through that formal Fines Victoria review process.

**Mr LIMBRICK:** Thank you for that answer. Can I just confirm then that part of the decision process sounds like—when you spoke about where the courts will land, part of the process is trying to determine whether someone would actually be able to successfully challenge this in court or not. Is that what you were referring to?

**Chief Comm. ASHTON:** Well, yes, because we are a model litigant in relation to any work that we do in prosecutions, and that includes in the regulatory work that we do. So if we think that it is not a good use of taxpayers money to expend on prosecuting a matter that we do not think will be successful, then it is a matter of principle that we do not proceed with those matters.

**Mr LIMBRICK:** Another question I am interested in is: in other states we have seen—I know in Western Australia they used police drones to monitor activities and social distancing and that sort of thing. Has Victoria Police been using drones for this type of purpose?

**Chief Comm. ASHTON:** Yes, we did on a couple of occasions. Over Easter and the week before Easter we had operations we were running along the beaches which were looking at things like the boat ramps and beach car parks and activity on beaches. We also utilised our rotary air wing for that purpose as well. So we had the drones and the helicopters used as part of their work to patrol those areas to get a sense of how many people were on those beaches and whether they were breaching safety conditions in relation to the CHO's orders. Particularly, there was a weekend of very fine weather, which was the first week that the restrictions were brought in, and that was a very challenging week in the beachfront areas. The drones were used to give us some information there. As I say, over Easter we had a specific operation and part of that operation was looking at the beach environment, not only in the metro area but also down the Bellarine Peninsula and over through Phillip Island, Cowes et cetera.

**Mr LIMBRICK:** May I also ask: is the drone technology used in conjunction with any other technologies such as facial recognition technology?

**Chief Comm. ASHTON:** No, we do not have that open to us at the moment, so we do not use that. But the cameras beam back to a command truck which is usually used in close proximity to where the drones are working. That is because under the CASA rules we cannot fly out of sight, so the drones can only be used within sight of the operator, which is usually done from a truck, and that signal is beamed to the truck. We also have the capability to upload that signal to our State Control Centre as required as well.

**Mr LIMBRICK:** Another question: in the normal course of police operations members of the public are able to identify police, and if they have some concern with what the police are doing they can make a

complaint, because they can identify the police. How do people identify firstly that it is actually a police drone? Like, if they feel that a drone is being used inappropriately, how would they know that it is a police drone and how could they go about identifying that and making some sort of complaint if they felt that the drone was being used inappropriately?

**Chief Comm. ASHTON:** Yes, sure. Well, we do get complaints all the time from the community about drone usage more generally, and so we then factor in if it was a police drone that was being used on that occasion—that is, check with the air wing to see. ‘We’ve had a complaint about a drone’, and we can say it was the police drone because it was used in a particular area, and then we can provide feedback to the complainant that it was a police drone used. We have got some plans to mark up our drones more effectively so that the community can easily see it is a police drone. We are still in the process of doing that, so at the moment we rely on people to make the complaint and then reconcile back. But we are hoping soon that we will be able to have more easily recognisable drones, which goes to your point.

**Mr LIMBRICK:** So at the moment if I see a drone outside, there is no way for me to know whether that is a normal drone or a police drone? They are unable, members of the public, to actually determine that at the moment; is that correct?

**Chief Comm. ASHTON:** That is correct. Visually, that is correct.

**Ms NEVILLE:** Could I just say on that, just a personal example of this: the drones that we used down at Eastern Beach and around the Geelong foreshore. Police were nearby, so people would say, ‘Oh, there’s the police drone’. They are often not that far away either, so you do often have a good—I get sometimes there might be a remote area where that is more difficult, but normally it is pretty clear because police are there watching it as well and there is a police car nearby.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Minister. The Member’s time has expired.

**Ms VALLENCE:** Thank you, Minister and Chief Commissioner, for your appearance to this hearing. My questions first are to the Chief Commissioner, and just to pick up on some questions before, of other Committee members, Chief Commissioner, how many reports to the Police Assistance Line have resulted in spot checks being conducted, and how many have resulted in a fine being issued by Victoria Police?

**Chief Comm. ASHTON:** Well, the actual break-up of how many fines were issued as a result of Police Assistant Line calls I have to take on notice and provide you with that break-up. I could certainly give you the total number of fines, which we have done, which is the 5604. But those have risen—

**Ms VALLENCE:** Yes, specifically for the PAL. As you will take that on notice, that is much appreciated for the benefit of the Committee.

**Ms NEVILLE:** Well, can I just say on that, though, I do not think that figure would actually exist because it is an intelligence process. It is then sent out to the local police. They do not record that they got it from the PAL; in fact they would not know it has come from the PAL. So all you can do is say there were about 70 000 calls to PAL and we have had 48 000 compliance checks and 5000 fines. That is the range. So there would be a significant portion of them that have come from the Police Assistance Line but not all of them, because some of them will be potentially people dobbing in people they do not like. So there is an intelligence process over the top.

**Ms VALLENCE:** So there is no mechanism in your reporting to identify where the report has come from—not specifying that it has come via PAL?

**Ms NEVILLE:** That PAL report would go through to someone else, who would then decide: are they sending a team of people out, so no.

**Ms VALLENCE:** So it does not actually specify that it is via PAL?

**Ms NEVILLE:** No.

**Ms VALLENCE:** Okay. Chief Commissioner, there have been reports that Victorians have had to wait up to 45 minutes to make a report via PAL. Have these delays at all been due to insufficient resources or any technical issues at the Ballarat call centre?

**Chief Comm. ASHTON:** Yes, in the lead-up and through Easter we had significant volumes of calls coming in on the Police Assistance Line, which exceeded its sort of normal day-to-day volumes. So then the process was the call was immediately answered, and then, depending on what the content of the call was, they would be then put in a queue after that. There were some waiting times. At the worst it got I think the average waiting time was around 17 to 20 minutes. But certainly following on from that initial burst where we were getting thousands of calls a day, we then engaged the provider to increase the capacity, which was done. So certainly following Easter Sunday, Monday those volumes were then able to be managed by the provision of more call takers by the service provider.

**Ms VALLENCE:** Minister, it was reported back in August last year that 150 staff at the Police Assistance Line call centre in Ballarat would be laid off, and that followed an additional number of casual and part-time staff later in the year, last year. Have any of these particular staff been rehired at all and particularly for that coronavirus-related increase in the volume of calls to PAL?

**Ms NEVILLE:** It is a bit of a stretch with COVID here, but anyway I am happy to address it. When we started the Police Assistance Line we scaled it up because we were not sure. We had not done it before; it was the first time in Victoria, which we have funded. And obviously it has shown to be a huge success, having funded it, and we have continued to scale up in normal calls to the Police Assistance Line. But there were a number of casual staff that there just was not enough work for, so those casual staff were not employed. I cannot tell you whether they picked them up or not, but they may have. It depends on what those staff were doing—had they found other work or not. But they were able to, firstly, increase the hours of the permanent staff that are there and some of the part-time staff that wanted to do additional hours, and then they brought in additional people on top of that.

**Ms VALLENCE:** Okay. Police Commissioner, as you said, there was an increase in volume, particularly around the Easter period, for coronavirus and that as a result you requested an increase in human resources to cope with that. Are they just on short fixed term, or are they ongoing employees? If so, could you let us know how many extra resources were employed?

**Chief Comm. ASHTON:** Yes, we certainly initially did it. I think it was probably about a three-month arrangement to be reviewed. But I will certainly get the numbers of how many—did you want to know how many additional call takers it was; is that right?

**Ms VALLENCE:** Yes, how many additional staff during that period.

**Chief Comm. ASHTON:** Yes. Well, I will get that number for you, but I think also—

**Ms VALLENCE:** In PAL—for the Police Assistance Line specifically.

**Chief Comm. ASHTON:** Yes.

**Ms NEVILLE:** Can I just say we specifically put in the contract an ability to have surge capacity, not that we predicted a pandemic and we would be using it for this purpose. But the agency needs to be able to uplift when required for that sort of capacity, and that was why—

**Ms VALLENCE:** Yes. No, I appreciate that, Minister. Last year 270 staff were trained to take calls. In a benefit from the cost to the taxpayer of training those staff who were then laid off, were they actually brought back in, or were new staff brought in and then retrained?

**Ms NEVILLE:** I think I answered that, which is I cannot determine that. But that is the nature of some of these call centres. We wanted to make sure that we were well placed to be able to deal with demand for a service that Victoria had never provided, but we always factored in a surge capacity component which enabled us to move up and down as the community required, and that is the system that we have.

**Ms VALLENCE:** Thank you. Just finally on that, perhaps on notice, Police Commissioner, if you could provide the cost for that surge uplift—if you could provide the cost of those additional resources over that period, for the benefit of the Committee.

**Chief Comm. ASHTON:** Sure, I will do that.

**Ms NEVILLE:** I think it is already covered by the contract that we paid, because as I just said the surge capacity enables us to do exactly what we did. So it is already covered.

**Ms VALLENCE:** Okay, so that is a confirmation that that is covered by the existing contract?

**Ms NEVILLE:** Yes.

**Ms VALLENCE:** Thank you. We understand that bail reporting was suspended while the Chief Health Officer's directions were in place. Chief Commissioner, how many people had their bail conditions lifted as a result of the coronavirus crisis or while the Chief Health Officer's directions have been in place?

**Chief Comm. ASHTON:** I am just trying to find that data. I have got it here. On bail—

**Ms VALLENCE:** We can take it on notice if it is not readily at hand.

**Chief Comm. ASHTON:** No, that is okay. I have got it here. There were 3014 cases where we contacted people that are on bail through the police informants, and 69 of those were also managed—as well as through these different arrangements, were also the subject of local office offender management plans, because they were identified as potentially being a slightly higher risk than the others. That is the number of people that we contacted in relation to it.

**Ms VALLENCE:** Just to shift tack—and conscious of time—to you, Minister, in your capacity as the Minister for the Coordination of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, or DELWP, was there any advice sought or provided by the Chief Health Officer around the Victorian waste system and any restrictions on activities relating to waste collection or waste processing during coronavirus?

**Ms NEVILLE:** The Chief Health Officer directives go to issues around social distancing—all of the advice. So all our waste and recycle companies needed to comply with those restrictions, like anyone else did, including if people could work from home, they should—all of those sorts of things. So as I understand, DELWP have been working with that industry to make sure they are complying with the Chief Health Officer restrictions. But they have also been working—because of some of that social distancing—looking at ways with local council, for example, to extend the times people can collect rubbish, for example, so that you are still meeting all your community needs, might that be over a longer period.

**Ms VALLENCE:** Yes, it is pretty hard to collect and process waste from home. On that, actually, are you aware of any tips or waste transfer stations that actually closed or refused waste from the general public during the coronavirus period?

**Ms NEVILLE:** I am not aware of any that were closed.

**Ms VALLENCE:** It was reported a number of municipalities had their tips closed, and also reports of illegal dumping are increasing in terms of waste and hard rubbish. I am not sure if the EPA is there, but from an EPA perspective into illegal dumping during the coronavirus period were there any complaints or the number of complaints and number of investigations conducted by the EPA on illegal dumping during this period?

**Ms NEVILLE:** I might just ask the Secretary of DELWP if he has got any further advice. John?

**Mr BRADLEY:** Thank you, Minister. If you can hear me okay, the short answer in relation to the impacts on transfer stations and tips is that there were initially in the early stages of the response some sites where they took it upon themselves to close in a kind of abundance of caution at the early stages of the Chief Health Officer's directions. We provided supportive guidance working with the MAV and the sector to make sure that people were in a position of clarity about what the Chief Health Officer's directions meant for those transfer stations, and certainly at this point we see no disruption to kerbside recycling in relation to those services.

**Ms VALLENCE:** Thank you. Minister, on Victoria's alpine resorts, when will Victoria's alpine resorts get certainty about the snow season? I noticed just earlier in May that the season was still being assessed, and you also announced that you would provide some support—if you could provide information on what that support is to Victoria's alpine resorts and when they will receive certainty.

**Ms NEVILLE:** Yes, so look—

**The CHAIR:** I am sorry, Minister, to cut you off there, but the Member's time has expired.

**Ms VALLENCE:** On notice?

**The CHAIR:** We thank you very much for appearing before the Committee today, and to the Chief Commissioner, we thank you also, and of course all of your departmental officials. The Committee will follow up any questions on notice that were taken in writing, and responses will be required within five working days of the Committee's request. Thank you for your time.

**Witnesses withdrew.**