

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

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

Melbourne—Thursday, 17 December 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 Nina Taylor

Ms Bridget Vallence

WITNESSES

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

Mr Paul Younis, Secretary,

Mr Nicholas Foa, Deputy Secretary, Transport Services, and

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

The CHAIR: Welcome to the third series of hearings for the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee's Inquiry into the Victorian Government's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic.

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

The committee is 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.

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

We ask that mobile telephones be turned to silent.

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

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

We welcome you back, Minister. We invite you to make an opening statement of no more than 8 minutes, and this will be followed by questions from the committee. Thank you.

Ms ALLAN: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, committee, for the opportunity to present on the Department of Transport and the broader transport portfolio's response to the coronavirus pandemic over the course of 2020. I think it is fair to say, like many of us, whether it is in our personal lives or our work lives, we are still coming to terms with what has happened over the course of this year and what some of the medium and longer term impacts are about the way we live and the way we work. It is fair to say that in the department we are also continuing to gather the data on what medium- and long-term impact the pandemic is having on our transport network, about the way people use the network and the impact that has on the way we operate and deliver transport services for the Victorian community. Whilst we have a day-by-day data analysis of the road and public transport usage, we will continue that longer term data collection to help inform how we continue to run high-quality transport services for Victorians.

Also at the same time we are continuing our work on our Big Build, our transport infrastructure program, to make sure that we continue to provide the quality transport infrastructure, looking at what else we need to invest in and also picking up on that data analysis on potential changes to travel patterns and community needs. I think a good example of one of the changes that we are keeping an eye on is the way people have changed their work patterns—what will be the longer term impact of the way people may continue to work from home or work closer to home—and that is particularly of interest for me in terms of what that means for people working and living in regional Victoria and then in terms of what that means for our regional rail and regional road links as well. But we do also know that it is more important than ever that we continue this ongoing investment in transport services.

Visual presentation.

Ms ALLAN: The first slide gives you an analysis of the public transport patronage from February through to Tuesday of this week. I think the last two times I have appeared before this committee we have spent some

time talking about the quite significant decline in public transport usage during the period of the pandemic where the case numbers were at their highest. But we are seeing now, as we move out of restriction and into our COVID-safe community, that public transport usage is starting to come back, albeit a little bit more slowly than the road network—and I will talk about that in a moment—but people are starting to continue to use public transport in greater numbers. I will talk over the course of this hearing I am sure, Chair, about the proactive measures that the Department of Transport is taking in terms of supporting people's confidence in using our public transport network, with the extensive work on the cleaning of the network, of the rolling stock and around stations and also the way we have been running a full timetable throughout the entire period of the pandemic to make sure we can support—even though there were very low numbers—people moving around, to get to work as permitted workers. We ran a full service during stage 4 restrictions.

As I indicated, the next slide looks to the road usage. You will see there that our road usage is 97 per cent of the pre-pandemic baseline. So traffic volumes are just 3 per cent below those pre-pandemic levels, and I am sure any of you who have been travelling around the city by road will have noticed from your own personal, lived experience the increase in traffic. I should also say that during the period of the pandemic road usage never dropped to the low levels of public transport. It stayed somewhere around 40 to 44 per cent at the height of the pandemic, and it certainly bounced back quite quickly. And this is one of the policy challenges for the department and for the ministers in this portfolio, as to how we continue to make the investments in seeing the road network operate effectively and also support people's confidence in using public transport.

One of the ways we are looking at dealing with both of those issues is the greater deployment of real-time technology and information, putting information literally in people's hands through our various devices that we all carry around these days—putting that information directly into people's hands so that they can make the smart choice for whether they want to use road or rail to get around. I have mentioned the cleaning, which is important to continue on in terms of the operation of the public transport network, and also note that the mandatory wearing of masks on our public transport system and in and around our train stations I think will play a very big role in people being confident about using public transport in the weeks and months ahead.

I will just touch now briefly, in the bit of time that I have got available before the conclusion of this presentation, on some of the key initiatives that have been undertaken during the course of the pandemic by the broader transport portfolio. One of the initiatives, as you can see there—I think I mentioned this in the previous hearing—was the investment in the building works program, investing in those smaller road and rail projects to support economic activity throughout the course of 2020 and into early 2021, and also too the ongoing work on the Big Build program. I also mentioned in the previous hearing how we had the opportunity to do a lot of planning so we could come out of the pandemic fast-tracking a number of our Big Build projects, particularly in the level crossing area. But also too on our road network the \$380 million allocation—back in July, I think it was—that was titled 'Creating more space on our roads' is a package, as I mentioned before, that is about using technology and also enforcement to help with smarter use of the network. Obviously there is a lot of work going on in building road infrastructure, upgrading roundabouts and upgrading intersections and traffic lights and those sorts of interventions, but also too there is the use of technology and other levers that can help people to travel more smartly around our road network.

I am confident over the course of the presentation I will get the opportunity to talk a little bit more about how we were able to maintain our effort across a Big Build program. It was a real credit to the work that Corey and the Major Transport Infrastructure Authority team undertook with the construction companies and the unions and the workforce to keep our sites going, and to keep our sites going safely, in a very COVID-safe way, during the period of the pandemic.

I have mentioned this a couple of times already in terms of how we supported the safe operation of the public transport network—one of the ways was to keep as full a timetable running throughout as much of the pandemic as we could to have the services available to the community. And that is time.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. Mr Richard Riordan, MP.

Mr RIORDAN: Thank you, Chair. Welcome back, Minister, for the third inquiry that PAEC has done on this. And as the final crisis cabinet minister to meet with us in this process, I was wondering if you would take the opportunity for PAEC to take note of the recommendation from the Victorian Ombudsman this morning, which has called on your government to apologise to the residents of the Flemington and North Melbourne

public housing estates for harm and distress caused by the imposition of your immediate lockdown on them on 4 July.

Ms ALLAN: Look, Chair, I am happy to respond to the question in so far as I can, noting I do not have the portfolio responsibility. I do acknowledge, as you did in your question, that I was a member of the Crisis Council of Cabinet, so I am comfortable to answer it in those terms. But obviously I do not have the specific portfolio oversight of those areas. I just want to make that clear from the outset in terms of the detail that I am able to go into in responding to your question, and also noting that because we were engaged this morning in the budget hearing, I have not had a chance to review the Victorian Ombudsman's report. I have seen statements from the government, but I have not had a chance to review the Ombudsman's report or her recommendations. So I just want to say that at the outset in responding to your question.

Look, of all the difficult decisions and all the difficult meetings we had as a Crisis Council of Cabinet—and we had many meetings at many different hours of the day and night, particularly during the most difficult of times when the numbers were at their highest—this was, from my personal observation, the most difficult meeting and the most difficult decision we had to make as a government. We made that decision understanding very clearly the magnitude of the decision we were taking in terms of restricting the movement of people who live in those public housing estates around North Melbourne and Flemington. But we did so, and I am firmly of the view—and I know that the government has made some broader comments on this—that it was the right decision to take. And just as the—

Mr RIORDAN: So is that a no?

Ms ALLAN: Can I just finish? Just as the federal government made the decision to close international borders, just as state governments made decisions to close state borders and we ourselves closed the regional-metropolitan border and also made the decision to restrict the movement of people in the public housing estates, we did so for the primary reason and the primary purpose to save lives. And it was deeply difficult and challenging. It was though the right decision to take because it saved lives.

Mr RIORDAN: Okay. We have got the independent Victorian Ombudsman, who has said—accepting some of the points that you have just made that, you know, there was a crisis on, with all the balance of probabilities, with the balance of facts given to an independent person to look at—you, the Victorian government, not DHHS or other departments but the Victorian government, should apologise. It is their number one recommendation.

Ms ALLAN: Well, we will take time to consider the Ombudsman's recommendations. And again, if I can just note that I have not had the opportunity to read or even see the Ombudsman's report. I do want to say that at the outset. However, as I understand it and as I am advised, there are opinions and findings around the government and some observations that are made that we do not support. Now, I understand that the minister responsible has made public comments this morning, but again, can I just reiterate that this was the most difficult and challenging decision to take. It was taken in the full understanding of the magnitude of what was taking place, and it was done so to save lives.

Mr RIORDAN: So for the record, PAEC will not be recording your view on that. Now, moving on. Minister, following yet another revelation in the *Age* this morning about the chaos behind the scenes at times with the COVID crisis, was it your government's policy and your department's policy not to tell taxis that you hired to carry patients to hotel quarantine that they were in fact carrying hot patients, patients with COVID?

Ms ALLAN: Look, I might ask for the assistance of the Secretary in answering this. I do not think I fully understand. I am not fully following the—

Mr RIORDAN: It is on the front page of the *Age* today.

Ms ALLAN: Yes, I have read that article, and the article went to issues, as I understood it, and matters to do with the operation of the hotel quarantine program.

Mr RIORDAN: It was dealing with the fact that people in your department, and I am assuming it is yours because Mr Younis told us last time that you were handling transport for hotel quarantine—that you have transported up to 40 backpackers with the explicit direction not to tell the taxis that they were hot patients.

Ms ALLAN: I do not have knowledge of that explicit direction, and I will ask the Secretary for some assistance.

Mr YOUNIS: Thanks, Minister, and Mr Riordan. I have no knowledge of that. I have not actually read the *Age* this morning and report. The commercial passenger vehicles were not transporting people from airports to hotel quarantine; that was a SkyBus task. The commercial passenger vehicles were engaged through this process to transport goods or transport people, once the hotel quarantine had finished—transport them back home. So there were no instructions at any point in time that I am absolutely aware of of keeping it secret about the nature and the people—

Mr RIORDAN: So are you saying the 40 backpackers were not taken to the Brady Hotel in a taxi?

Mr YOUNIS: I am not aware of the particular circumstances you are talking about or where they came from. Unfortunately I have not read the article; I do not know the context of the question that is being provided to me. I am happy to provide that when I can get that.

Mr RIORDAN: Okay, so perhaps to make it easier for the committee, you might be able to provide from the start of August—I think it is around 6 August—your 13cabs account, which I understand is how you ordered the taxis. I think that would make it really clear for both yourselves and ourselves where the taxis went from.

Mr YOUNIS: So just to be clear, the Department of Transport did not order the taxis or arrange the taxis. Our role is to make sure that taxis could operate in a safe manner. We put in a number of measures and talked to the taxi industry through the entire COVID period about how they could provide a safe environment for both themselves and the travelling public.

Mr RIORDAN: So would it concern you greatly, then, if the Victorian government was ordering taxis for infected patients and not telling the taxis?

Ms ALLAN: I think it is a little unfair to ask the Secretary to respond on behalf of the Victorian government.

Mr RIORDAN: No. He just said he was responsible—

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan.

Mr RIORDAN: No. Secretary Younis just said he was responsible for making sure that there were safe procedures for commercial passenger vehicles.

Ms ALLAN: Yes, but we were not the contractual—

Mr RIORDAN: I am asking: would it concern him if government departments were ordering taxis for COVID-positive patients and not telling them?

Ms ALLAN: Well, we need to substantiate that.

Mr YOUNIS: I am not certain about the circumstances you are talking about, but I think one of the assurances that I can give this committee is that in every circumstance where we provided transport services, whether that be on taxis or public transport, we did that in full knowledge and full consultation with the Chief Health Officer. So any decision that we made, any decision that any other department made, was done with full understanding of the Chief Health Officer. It was around health advice, and I am very comfortable that we were constantly engaging with senior staff in the Department of Transport and senior staff in the Department of Health and Human Services, understanding and ensuring that any transport we provided, whether that be public transport, commercial passengers or others, was done in a safe manner that met the requirements.

Mr RIORDAN: Under quarantine 2.0, are you still responsible for transporting people from airports to hotels?

Mr YOUNIS: No, that is being done by the hotel quarantine.

Ms ALLAN: And to be clear, at all stages, the contract has sat with SkyBus. The Department of Transport was not responsible for the transporting. In the initial stage it was making the connection for the contract.

Mr RIORDAN: But now that we have got departments back to normal, clearly the health and safety of people engaged in public transport, whether it is the taxi industry or the SkyBus industry—you would be very keen to make sure that they are doing it in a safe way.

Mr YOUNIS: The absolute short answer to that, Mr Riordan, is yes, and the way that we do that is by engaging consistently and constantly with the Chief Health Officer, because we are not experts in health; what we are is experts in transport, and what we do is take the advice from the health officer as to how we can provide that transport in a safe manner.

Mr RIORDAN: Right. The *Age* also reported this morning along the same lines that yet another person had arrived at our airport and managed to find their way home—for three days in fact. The government then asked the person involved to drive themselves back to hotel quarantine—once again, a job that I thought we had quite clear lines around, how people got to hotel quarantine. Now, we heard evidence yesterday that there were some 1200 to 1400 people seconded to hotel quarantine, so there were lots of people at this time—this was around grand final time when we could not even have friends at our home to watch the footy. Why didn't Transport go and get that person and bring them back to hotel quarantine? What was everyone doing?

Ms ALLAN: These are not the responsibilities of the Department of Transport. Our responsibility is around, as the Secretary has just indicated, the regulatory environment for the operation of commercial passenger vehicles and the relationship with our public transport operators around the cleaning regime for the network. Those matters are a matter for the COVID Quarantine Victoria agency.

Mr RIORDAN: No. Back in September, at our last hearing, we were clearly told you were responsible for transport from—

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan!

Ms ALLAN: No. In September those matters were the responsibility of the Department of Justice and Community Safety.

Mr RIORDAN: So SkyBus wasn't your responsibility then.

Ms ALLAN: No.

Mr RIORDAN: All right. Okay. These examples, yet again in the paper today, about how we transport people who have COVID or potentially have COVID—can Victorians have complete assurance that going forward with the new hotel quarantine system everyone is doing what they need to do to keep people safe and we are not having people driving themselves to hotels, we are not having people put in taxis that are not being cleaned or warned? Are there enough robust measures in place to ensure that, Secretary?

Mr YOUNIS: Mr Riordan, I make it clear that the government have set up an administrative office that is responsible for the hotel quarantine. They take in the whole gamut of responsibilities from the arrival to the management of people in the hotel quarantine environment.

Mr RIORDAN: But have you given them direction?

Mr YOUNIS: That is not the role of the Department of Transport.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Secretary. Mr Riordan, your time has expired. Mr Gary Maas, MP.

Mr MAAS: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister and departmental officials, for your appearance yet again before this inquiry. Minister, I will try and keep my questions within the remit of your responsibilities. If I could take you to patronage levels on our public transport system, we noticed the graphs that you presented but I was hoping you could take the committee through the patronage levels on public transport and that fluctuation since March, when we first went into lockdown.

Ms ALLAN: Thank you, Gary. Yes, as I touched on in my presentation, we monitor daily the data as well as looking to how we can get some longer term trends across the use of the network. As I mentioned before—I think we have had this conversation the last two previous times I have appeared before the committee on COVID-related matters—there is obviously no doubt that through the course of the year patronage dropped and dropped quite dramatically. It did follow the level of restrictions that particularly Melbourne was experiencing at different stages. During stage 3—during that March, April, May period, during that first period of stage 3—patronage decreased to around 90 per cent below baseline, so 10 per cent of normal patronage. There were only around 200 000 people using our public transport network in April. That compared to about 2.35 million daily trips that you have in more normal times. Then as restrictions were eased, passengers came back. Then obviously during stage 4 restrictions patronage was less than 9 per cent of the normal levels of the network. It was different across different modes, I should say. Metropolitan trains were at about 8 per cent, regional trains a bit lower, 6 per cent, obviously recognising that there were the restrictions around the movement between regional Victoria and Melbourne, and trams were at about 7 per cent of normal passengers. But interestingly bus patronage stayed a little bit stronger, with 14 per cent on the metropolitan bus network and 22 per cent on the regional bus network.

Now, since we have moved out of those restrictions and restrictions have begun to ease, we have seen patronage steadily increase. On patronage, the latest data, which is as at yesterday, 16 December, our total public transport use is 46 per cent of baseline: metropolitan trains is 39 per cent; trams, 42 per cent; regional trains, 39 per cent; and metropolitan and regional buses again are a bit of a stand-out here—they are at 65 per cent and 63 per cent patronage levels. So we are seeing numbers return. And probably in the new year and when people get to the other side of the Christmas holiday season and workers start to return in greater numbers to the CBD of Melbourne, I think we will see those public transport numbers steadily increase. And people can use our public transport system with great confidence, knowing we are working very hard to keep it COVID safe.

Mr MAAS: Great. Thanks, Minister. What has the government done to protect staff and passengers on public transport during the pandemic?

Ms ALLAN: Thank you. It is important that you identified staff in your question, because obviously thousands and thousands of people work on our public transport system, and they worked all the way through the pandemic as we provided a full timetable of services to support people who did need to get around our community even when we were living under the highest level of restrictions. So we have had had measures in place that do support staff who work on the network and people who engage with the network as passengers.

One of the initiatives we undertook in July was to add 95 extra train services each week either side of the morning and afternoon peaks. Those services started running in July. We identified either side of the peak period—the shoulder peak period, as it is called—as the time to run those services, because we were wanting to encourage people to think about maybe staggering the time they go to work, either start a little bit later or finish a little bit later depending on their work circumstances and if they can do that, but also giving passengers confidence that there will be greater space because of the extra services on the network. And there will be even more space from next year with the additional 450 services that will be added to the timetable each week from the end of January—that is for both the regional and the metropolitan network—again giving much greater capacity on our network. We also added additional tram services in the middle of the year around the CBD—along St Georges Road, Brunswick Street and Collins Street—with our larger E-class trams.

Also to help slow the spread of the virus, particularly at its peak, we very early on moved to stop public transport staff handling cash, which was obviously trying to limit the transmission of what was a highly contagious virus. Also, and we may get the chance to talk about this in greater detail depending on time, there was a significant cleaning program put in place across all modes of the public transport system, cleaning of those high-touch services—you know, the doors and the handrails and the like—and also a deep clean of our rolling stock each and every night. We installed 300 touchless hand-sanitising stations at our busiest train stations, tram stops and bus terminals across the state.

I think I have mentioned previously that the mandatory wearing of masks is very important to help keep us a COVID-free community but also in the use of public transport in those spaces where you obviously cannot always control on your own the social distancing requirements. So the mandatory wearing of masks continues to be a very important part of helping support people to move around our public transport network.

Mr MAAS: Thank you. I was hoping you could give us an update on the work that the government has been doing with public transport operators and staff during the pandemic.

Ms ALLAN: Yes, thank you. There has been a huge amount of work done with our public transport operators, both those that are part of the government itself and those that operate under the contract and franchise arrangements on behalf of the Victorian government. And, as I have mentioned, other than for that period of time when there was a curfew in place limiting the movement of people after 8.00 pm in metropolitan Melbourne, we pretty much ran a full public transport timetable. We did so because even at the lowest numbers, when there were about 200 000 people a day using the network, they still needed to have a reliable public transport service to support them, whether they were nurses or cleaners going in and out of our hospital system or retail workers going to work.

To support the slow of the spread of the virus during that period of time and also to support the ongoing operation of our network there was a lot of work done, whether it was with Metro Trains, Yarra Trams, our bus operators or the commercial passenger vehicle providers, with different support packages so they could put in place the additional cleaning requirements that we—when I say ‘we’, the department and the government—required of them for their COVID-safe operations. There was work in particular to support commercial passenger vehicles to help continue to support that industry more broadly, because obviously they were a little bit more exposed to some elements of the virus, and there was a package of \$22 million of support that went towards the industry.

Also you mentioned before the staff who work on the network. Public transport is a big employer of people, so maintaining the services kept people in jobs. And in the commercial passenger vehicle area maintaining their operation also supported their ongoing employment. Now, particularly in the CPV area they may have been eligible for some of the federal government and other state government support as private businesses, but we understood with all of our public transport operators that there needed to be some additional support provided and we stepped in and provided that where appropriate.

Mr MAAS: Great. Thank you. I think some of your answers have alluded to this already, but what is the government doing to ensure public transport is safe as passengers return?

Ms ALLAN: All the way through the period of the pandemic over 2020 we were always wanting to make sure that we were ready for people to return to the network. We are really pleased, as I said, that we are at 46 per cent as of yesterday, and that number is continuing to rise. I have mentioned some of the things, and I will not repeat myself around the cleaning, the hand sanitising and the additional services as well—all of these things are very important to support people moving around the network. What I have not touched on is some of the new technology we are rolling out on the public transport network. There has been a recent update to the PTV app to make it easier for people to get that information and to know ahead of time when a service will arrive so if you do not want to, you do not have to hang around on the platform or at the tram or bus stop to wait for your service. People will be pleased to know this app is free to download on their iPhone or Android device, depending on what sort of device you may have.

I mentioned before that we went cashless for a period of time. We have remained cashless on buses and at stations—again to help manage the contact between people. There is also some work on the technology front going on with the department around developing and trialling a new crowding capacity indicator to give passengers again information about how busy that next service is going to be. As I said, it is a trial that we are undertaking at the moment, and this will be really important information not just as we move through this period of the pandemic and into that recovery and rebuilding phase but as people start returning to the network. It was not that long ago that we were talking about large numbers of people on our public transport system and what we were doing to manage large numbers of people, particularly during the busy peak period of time. The deployment of this new technology is a consequence of the pandemic but will be very valuable for the ongoing operation of our network.

Mr MAAS: Thank you, Minister.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mr David Limbrick.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you, Chair. And thank you, Minister and team, for appearing again. I would just like to pick up on something that Mr Riordan was talking about. When you responded to him, Minister, I am

not trying to verbal you but I think you said something along the lines of, 'We took the right decision because we saved lives. We were trying to save lives'. I am sure as the minister would know, there are limits on government action to save lives. We have seen more extreme responses to the pandemic in other countries, and I have mentioned this before. In China they welded doors shut, and I am sure in other countries they have done more extreme things, but the limitation on the actions that a government can take is that they must be proportionate to the threat and the least restrictive of human rights in order to manage that threat. I do not dispute that the actions that the government took to stop the spread of disease worked in the case of the public housing towers or other actions. What I am concerned about is whether they were proportionate and the least restrictive of human rights. Do you feel that the actions or are you confident that the actions that the government took in this case that you were talking about with Mr Riordan were proportionate and were the least restrictive of human rights?

Ms ALLAN: Yes, I do. Again, I will limit my comments to my role as a member of the Crisis Council of Cabinet and not stray into the portfolio areas too much, but I do. It was a period in I think it was early July. We saw case numbers on a daily basis rising rapidly. They were rising in particular geographic areas of metropolitan Melbourne, and in the case of the public housing estates there were very large numbers around that North Melbourne-Flemington area.

Mr LIMBRICK: Yes.

Ms ALLAN: We also had—I recall well—a discussion about the structure of the public housing infrastructure in those areas where there are a lot of shared common spaces and the great risk that posed in terms of the transmission of the virus, a virus that we all understood at that point in time to be highly contagious and very easy to spread very, very quickly. We knew that very well in that early July period. Just as with the observations I was making about the cleaning on the public transport network, we knew of the high risk of transmission in those public housing estates where there are shared laundry facilities, shared foyer spaces, lifts, a lot of common spaces where a lot of people are touching the same spaces, and the fact that there were cases in those estates led in part to informing the government making that very difficult decision that, yes, was proportionate to the risk at the time. Look, it was, as I said before, I would count it as one of the most difficult decisions the government had to take of all the decisions that we had to take during the period of the pandemic, and it was done for the primary reason—as all the decisions we take—which was about slowing the spread of the virus to save lives.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you, Minister. And with regard to the least restrictive of human rights, did you see the human rights charter assessments as part of that process?

Ms ALLAN: Look, in terms of the advice the Crisis Council of Cabinet were given on all of our decisions, whether it was in this case of the public housing estates in North Melbourne and Flemington or decisions around the regional and metropolitan boundary, the decisions on restricting the movement of people in workplaces, the advice that came to us, there was public health advice and there was other information and advice given around, as you point out, what is proportionate, the requirement to be proportionate. We were determined at every opportunity to take the right step to slow and stop the spread of the virus. That was always, after a lot of discussion and a lot of debate, pretty much on every issue that was the conclusion. We understood that we had to act to slow the spread of the virus. And I think where we are now—I think we are almost at the point now where we are losing count of the number of days where we have not had a community transmission case.

Mr LIMBRICK: Not over yet.

Ms ALLAN: We would not be here without some of those decisions being made, those deeply difficult decisions to move into stage 4 restrictions, to have a curfew in place, to lock down the towers. We simply would not be here now if those decisions had not been made. So that I would argue is evidence of the proportionality to the response.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you, Minister. If a particular action is going to be considered the least restrictive of rights, that suggests that there are other options that were presented. So what other options that were deemed not viable were considered in this? There must be multiple options available. If you are going to claim that

something is the least restrictive of rights, there must be something that is maybe more restrictive of rights and even less restrictive of rights but maybe not as effective. Were those options considered? What were they?

Ms ALLAN: Look, as with every deliberation at a cabinet or a cabinet committee level, as you rightly point out, there are always options and always different scenarios that can be considered. With all respect to this committee, I am not going to go through the ins and outs of all the different options that were presented to the Crisis Council of Cabinet because they were cabinet deliberations. I think ultimately where decisions were made they were made by consensus through that process. They were supported by all members of the committee. I do not want this to sound flippant, but it has worked.

Mr LIMBRICK: I am not disputing that.

Ms ALLAN: No, no, no, you are not. But I am just not wanting to sound flippant in rushing to say, 'It has all worked'. I think we have seen in Australia other jurisdictions make different decisions about shutting borders, opening borders, when do you open them, when do you close them. I think it is in the UK at the moment that there is a debate about how many people you can have around at Christmas. Well, there are always different options about the threshold at which you can set the level of restriction at a given time in response to what is happening with the spread of the virus and the movement of the virus around the community. We did take a very cautious approach on the decisions we made because we knew that with each gain we made with each stage of restriction, we had to lock that gain in to be able to build a platform for the next lifting of restrictions. As I said, I am just not in a position to be able to go through the different deliberations at cabinet—sorry, at the Crisis Council of Cabinet—other than to say yes, different scenarios were considered but where we ended up was always about limiting the spread of the virus.

Mr LIMBRICK: So just to summarise and clarify for me then, you are not going to disclose all the decisions, but there were multiple options taken and the option that was ultimately selected, in your view, is the least restrictive of rights that was effective? You are confident in that?

Ms ALLAN: I am confident that in relation to the decision taken on the public housing estates at North Melbourne and Flemington was the right decision to make because it saved lives.

Mr LIMBRICK: All right. Thank you. Another issue mentioned before was about security on the public transport network. One of the symptoms of the widespread suppression of human rights has been big mental health issues in the community and indeed lots of acute cases, and some of that surfaces within the public transport network. I have been taking the trains this week and I actually witnessed an incident like this this morning. What sort of change in the number of these incidents—I know this would be hard to measure because there are less people on the public transport network, but I have seen this personally a number of times and other people have been reporting to me that there seems to be a large number of people with severely acute mental health issues on the public transport system. How is that being measured and what is being done to treat that? I am sort of concerned that the initial response is to arrest these people with PSOs, but they clearly need help some of them.

Ms ALLAN: If time permits, I might ask either the Secretary or the Deputy Secretary to assist, but I will make some overall comments, and this was in response to some previous work done about I want to say four years ago where we did a lot of work with our authorised officers and improved the training of our authorised officers. I cannot speak for the PSOs because obviously they are managed by Victoria Police, but when it comes to the authorised officers that are engaged by the transport network, we undertook a huge amount of work in terms of providing additional training and support to understand issues like those that you mentioned—understanding why someone with a mental illness might be acting in a certain way on public transport and how to respond. Similarly, a large number of people who are homeless often use the public transport network and were being fined, and there were some significant issues that were raised by the public transport ombudsman that we responded to with some additional training. So there is, if you like, that baseline of training for the public transport network staff. In terms of what additional responses or information we are getting in terms of increased incidents with people with a mental illness, Nick, do you want to jump in on that?

Mr FOA: Yes, thank you, Minister, through you, Madam Chair. Yes, correct—there has been a lot of training going on with our operators. We also have a weekly forum with our network operators that goes to issues of safety on the network for all the issues we have just been talking about but also personal safety. There

has been quite a bit of work going on about the safety of women and girls travelling on the network, so we have been working with our operators on that as well. The training goes to also support our staff. You may have seen on the network the 'be kind' campaign and 'thank you for saying thank you'. Those messages are out there. They are a two-way street, those messages—they are about being kind to each other as well as being kind to our station staff, who are the ones on the front line dealing with anybody that is having an episode in relation to mental health. So, as I say, there is quite a bit of training going on with the network. The PSOs are still on the network—we still have a strong presence of PSOs across the network—and I understand that the training in regard to VicPol's practices with PSOs is undergoing a bit of a refresh as well.

Mr LIMBRICK: All right. Thank you very much. I think I am out of time.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Limbrick. I will pass the call to Mr Danny O'Brien, MP.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Thank you, Chair. Minister, testimony before IBAC's Operation Esperance inquiry into V/Line and the Department of Transport's cleaning contracts clearly indicates that contracted additional cleaning of trains to slow the spread of COVID-19 did not in fact actually occur. How did the department allow this to occur?

Ms ALLAN: I might ask Nick to address that for you directly, because it goes directly to the operational matters of the department.

Mr FOA: Thank you, Minister. Through you, Madam Chair, the deep cleaning of trains does happen every evening across every vehicle, and I understand you are referring to evidence led at IBAC in relation to that matter. The department, well before IBAC, when we started to roll out further cleaning across the network, introduced an assurance program through a third-party independent auditor that looked at all the desktop policies of each of the cleaning companies, looked at material safety data sheets, looked at the actual chemicals being used, went and took samples of those chemicals and went and did field visits right across the network. We were cleaning up to 463 MTM trains a night, 650 trams and 155 buses. These were deep cleans every night. In addition to the Working for Victoria program, where you see people in the network wiping down high-touch areas during the day, we have also a deep clean every night. So despite what evidence was led, we are very confident of the products being used and of the approaches being taken. Each one of those approaches was checked off with the Chief Health Officer about the standard approach to the cleaning. We also rolled out the—

Mr D O'BRIEN: I understand, Mr Foa, that was the process, but the evidence very clearly at IBAC was that this often did not occur. Was there a failure, then, in that process?

Mr FOA: That was some evidence led at IBAC. The evidence that we have collected through our independent audit shows very high levels of compliance. There were obviously areas for improvement, and we sat down with the operators with each finding and each report back from a site visit or an interim report for those areas of improvement, whether they be on incomplete material data safety sheets, as in one case where the chemical did not match the material data safety sheet—it was still a Therapeutic Goods Administration-approved chemical, but it was a different one. So we managed to pick up those sorts of things. So we have no findings of the cleaning not occurring. In fact our data and the work that we have done with the operators right through the process suggest that cleaning standards have been improving. Indeed I think the proof is in the product on the trains themselves when you ride the service; it has never been cleaner.

Mr D O'BRIEN: You mentioned assurance assessments. Can you provide those to the committee?

Mr FOA: They are ongoing. We are at about phase 3 of those audits.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Even the ones that have been undertaken up to now. I mean, there is clearly a disconnect between what IBAC heard and what you are saying. It would be good to see the assessments.

Mr FOA: So, I would like to say, it is an ongoing process, Mr O'Brien. We are not finishing our audit process. In fact we are at the start of the process, not at the end of one, and we are constantly monitoring that and finding opportunities for improvement by the contractors. But I have to say, right across every contractor that has been involved in the service, we have been impressed at their high levels of compliance. But we are still working with them about ways to improve.

Mr D O'BRIEN: I think in the circumstances, high levels of compliance are nice, but we need 100 per cent compliance when it comes to this. So, Minister, a question to you: are you satisfied that the full cleaning that has been contracted and that has been directed by the CHO is actually occurring now?

Ms ALLAN: Yes, well, based on the advice from the department, and Nick has just taken you through a lot of that advice, there has been an extensive audit. That audit is ongoing to ensure that the answer can be yes to that question. Now, I can only give you that answer on the basis of that advice from the department, and, as Nick has indicated, it is an ongoing audit program. I should also caution the commentary around obviously what is still an ongoing investigation at IBAC. We are yet to see the findings, and as shocking and as appalling as some of the evidence we have seen and some of the witness statements we have seen at IBAC have been, we do need to see the final report from IBAC.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Can I ask, Minister: has anyone other than the former CEO of V/Line been sacked as a result of these findings—these hearings?

Ms ALLAN: Look, I am not the minister responsible for V/Line. That is Minister Carroll, and I should also point to the fact that V/Line is governed—

Mr D O'BRIEN: Well, perhaps a question for the Secretary, then.

Ms ALLAN: Well, I will pass to him. But on the way of passing it through I was going to make the point that V/Line is governed by a board, and it was on the advice of the minister who directed the V/Line board to immediately stand the former CEO down. But I might ask the Secretary to add to that.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Well, as we pass to the Secretary, the question also then is about the V/Line board, and not just in this context of COVID. There have been three IBAC investigations into the public transport sector, dating back to 2006. The CEO has gone. Has anyone on the board taken responsibility?

Ms ALLAN: Well, I think you mentioned three reports that go back to 2006. There have been different iterations of the board over that period of time.

Mr D O'BRIEN: The most recent one is current, as you mentioned.

Ms ALLAN: The most recent one is current; that is correct. Action was taken immediately by the minister through the board with the former CEO. In terms of further actions other than what the Secretary may wish to supplement, we will need to see the findings of the IBAC report. But I will let the Secretary supplement that.

Mr YOUNIS: Thanks, Minister. Once the allegations were heard at IBAC, the Minister for Public Transport instructed the board to dismiss Mr Pinder, and that was done immediately. The MTM employee involved, Mr Bollas, was also suspended. His employment was suspended and has now been terminated with MTM. The Transclean contracts that had been in place are now no longer. They have been terminated by both MTM and V/Line and are no longer operating on the network. I must say, the V/Line board have been as shocked and disappointed—and I will use the term 'disappointed'; if I could use a stronger word than that in the public, I would, but I will use the word 'disappointed'—as all of us who give our entire time to providing a safe network.

We have been meeting and discussing actions in relation to responding to these issues with the board constantly. I again met with the chair and the acting CEO of V/Line yesterday and with the head of Transport Services, Mr Foa, and there are a number of measures the board are putting into place right now about internal reviews and other reviews around not only the issues of this particular incidence but full governance, the culture of the organisation and the processes and procurement, which is appropriate to do in these sorts of circumstances. On top of that, independently we have asked the Victorian Public Sector Commission to look at the circumstances around this and governance around this, because it is incredibly disappointing to see senior people in an organisation like V/Line act in a way that appears to be—and I caution my language in relation to this, with an ongoing IBAC investigation—corrupt.

Mr D O'BRIEN: As you say, Secretary, that is an understatement. Minister, at the time much of this activity was alleged to have occurred Jeroen Weimar was chair of V/Line. He was subsequently moved. Why?

Ms ALLAN: Mr Weimar was for a long period of time the CEO of Public Transport Victoria. Following the creation of the standalone Department of Transport, he came in as the deputy secretary for Transport Services—I think I have got that title correct. And for a period of time—from memory from July 2018 through to April 2019, and I can correct the date for you—he was the chair of V/Line. I will check the 2019 date. If I do not have that correct, we can—

Mr D O'BRIEN: 1 July.

Ms ALLAN: 1 July—so it was a full 12 months. Jeroen was, in the transport portfolio, a highly successful public servant in providing outstanding service to the improvement of provision of public transport services across the state. Following his appointment as head of Transport Services—deputy secretary in the new department—and after a period of time he decided he wanted to go and explore other opportunities and provided his resignation to the Secretary, and he also informed me. It was his decision to look outside of the Department of Transport for other professional career opportunities.

Mr D O'BRIEN: And in doing so, did he mention at all this Operation Esperance?

Ms ALLAN: No. And it would be highly disappointing of you, Danny, to conflate the two.

Mr D O'BRIEN: It is a question, Minister. It is a simple question. What action now is the department taking to ensure that this sort of action does not happen again, given as I said there have been three IBAC inquiries and the evidence tendered in the most recent ones has potentially put Victorians at risk during the COVID crisis?

Mr YOUNIS: Thank you, Mr O'Brien. I think I will talk about what the department are doing in response to this in working with V/Line and the V/Line board. As I mentioned before, we are working closely with them about the actions that they can put in place, particularly in reviewing their procurement models, independent investigations and probity audits. The important part of that is that I have requested the Victorian Public Sector Commission to undertake a review of V/Line and provide independent advice about V/Line's organisational capabilities and governance. On top of that we are working, as I said, very closely with the acting CEO of V/Line and the board to review all of the elements that respond to the governance and culture and structure of the board.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Secretary. Ms Pauline Richards MP.

Ms RICHARDS: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister and officials, for your appearance this afternoon. I would like to take you, Minister, to some of the public transport specifics, and I am interested in the government's public transport economic response to the coronavirus crisis.

Ms ALLAN: Thank you very much. I am a little at risk of repeating some evidence I gave to the previous budget hearing that we engaged with this morning, so I will briefly move through some of the budget initiatives I have ready touched on. But we do understand how, through investing in our public transport system, we have an opportunity to help the Victorian economy recover and rebuild even stronger following the impacts of the coronavirus pandemic and also to support the employment of people in both the construction of our program but also the operation of our public transport network. Building better public transport means running more train, tram and bus services, and that in turn employs many more people—as drivers, as authorised officers, as public transport officials. So it is an important part of our community as it is an important part of our economy.

I have talked already this morning about some of the initiatives around the investment in the Suburban Rail Loop, the Melbourne Airport rail link and Geelong fast rail. I will not steal too much of Minister Carroll's thunder. When he comes to you later this afternoon I am sure he will want to talk to you about the new tram procurement, which is another way of supporting the Victorian economy by supporting our really important rolling stock manufacturing sector—a big employer, both directly and indirectly, in different sized companies around the state as well.

There is also work to support and begin the transition to a zero-emissions bus fleet, and also, I think I mentioned earlier today as well, as part of the \$2.7 billion building works package these initiatives I have just touched on are in addition to those investments that were made earlier in the year. We are seeing some of those works already out and about, on the ground. There is \$90 million to upgrade and replace sleepers, structures and signalling across our regional rail network. That is in addition to the investment we are making through the

Regional Rail Revival program. It includes renewing an additional 300 kilometres of sleepers and ballast to support the operation of our regional train services, both passenger and freight services. There is \$62 million for maintenance and restoration works to support regional trains and Melbourne's trams; \$23 million to improve stations and stops on the public transport network—that is as a particular focus on improving accessibility, recognising that it is really important that we make sure our network provides for people with a disability because for many of them public transport is the only way they can get out and about, and it is vital that our public transport system is as accessible as it possibly can be; and \$5.6 million to remove rubbish and graffiti and manage vegetation along transport corridors. There is a longer list but I might stop there because it is quite extensive and they are works that are happening, as I said—an injection of funds to get some of those shorter term projects happening.

Ms RICHARDS: Thank you, Minister. The commercial passenger vehicle industry is an important industry—I am being parochial just for 2 minutes—in Cranbourne. Taxis provide transport for people who are unable to drive or use other forms of public transport, and I know there was a really important \$22 million package to support the industry. I was wondering if you could take the committee through that package so we can get some understanding and some evidence?

Ms ALLAN: Yes, I am very happy to. Yes, the commercial passenger vehicle industry, again, employs a lot of people. It also is a really important part of our public transport service, whether it is through the multipurpose taxi program, which again helps people with a disability to go to work and go to those important medical appointments. We have also heard of the role that they did play through the delivery of goods during some periods of the pandemic. I think I reported previously to this committee about the work that our colleagues the Member for Oakleigh and a Member for Eastern Victoria Mr Rod Barton did for the government in having a look at what more immediate responses needed to be provided for the CPV industry as a consequence of the impact that the pandemic had on their industry. That did lead to that investment, a package being put together, of \$22 million for a range of initiatives to help support the industry, and in turn support Victorians who rely on the service. Some of the key initiatives included money—\$6 million—to subsidise depot fees paid by vehicle owners and drivers to ensure that the wheelchair-accessible vehicles are available for those who need them. It is really important to keep those vehicles on the road, and that money was focused on that. I mentioned the multipurpose taxi program before, and from 4 August there was an increase of the subsidy from 50 to 70 per cent for three months to help make rides more affordable for people, again keeping those services going.

There was from 4 August a doubling of the wheelchair-lifting fee paid by the government for three months, again another incentive to keep those vehicles operating. I should say for those last two initiatives, they have been extended to 16 December, so a little bit longer than the three months they were originally planned for. There were some refunds of the levy paid in the 2019–20 June quarter, so giving funding—money, I should say, not funding—directly back to drivers through that period of time. Then there was also \$3.5 million of grants to support that increased cleaning and sanitisation of vehicles across the state. There has been a lot of work through the commercial passenger vehicle regulator around the COVID-safe plans that the industry needs to have in place, and obviously a strong and robust cleaning regime is a big part of that. We are playing a role through the funding of grants to support the industry to implement those practices.

Ms RICHARDS: Thank you, Minister. We know we need to keep protecting passengers as restrictions are lifted and they return to work, so I am interested in how the government plans to be able to do that.

Ms ALLAN: I may run the risk of repeating myself a little bit from some of the previous information around the cleaning regime, the work we are doing on the sanitising stations, the work we are doing also with the new technology. I did want to just touch on a little bit more about those extra services that we are seeing coming on, both those that came on back in July and also those that will be coming on from 31 January next year, that will provide so many more options for people to move around. As I said, we want people to continue to use our public transport network. We think it is a great way to get around our city and the state, and it will be a safe way to get around our city and the state as a consequence of the huge amount of work that is going on across the entire transport team to keep it clean, to keep the movement of people going effectively through stations, and the deployment of new technology.

So giving additional services is also going to be really important, as I said before, as the economy starts to recover, as people start coming back into the CBD but also too as people start to move around the city in different ways. That peak-hour crush that we saw pre-pandemic—we have added a lot of extra services in the

peak hour, but we have also looked at either side of the peak hour and during the day as well, off-peak. There is growing demand across the regional and the metropolitan train network for more off-peak services. So the new train timetable works hard to meet both of those needs by giving more services more often across the network. As I have said a few times today, that does come as a consequence of those big investments we are making in infrastructure to make sure that the infrastructure can carry those extra train services that people are looking for.

Ms RICHARDS: Speaking of those big infrastructure projects, I know that a lot of construction on civil projects continued through the global pandemic, including some I observed. Can you advise on the safety protocols that were in place and whether they were effective?

Ms ALLAN: Yes. There was an enormous amount of effort from the very early days of the pandemic to implement very strong and robust COVID-safe work practices across all of our worksites. Corey and the MTIA team, with the construction companies and with the unions, did a terrific job working together. We were meeting every week or so during the period of the pandemic, picking up new practices and new innovations from different worksites and applying them more broadly across the program. We did see as a consequence of that really strong work that we were able to keep a lot of our worksites operating safely. What is just a tremendous credit to the workforce is that, as I said in the previous hearing, we largely held program, which is just terrific and shows a great pride in the workforce in the work that they are doing, which was very, very important.

It is also important to note that the construction industry already has very strong and robust OH&S practices. It is a dangerous industry outside of a pandemic period, and that is why for a long time unions have particularly worked very hard on worksites to make them as safe as they possibly can be for workers. It was that foundation, if you like—that OH & S platform, that WorkSafe foundation—that we were able to build the COVID response on top of. A lot of worksites already had PPE, personal protective equipment. You know, you go into a worksite—we have all done it—you have to wear the steelcapped boots. Particularly—even pre-pandemic—a lot of sites now require you to wear gloves. It is a lot of glasses—for those of you who do not wear glasses—and obviously hard hats, and so it was not unusual to add extra PPE into that environment that was already used to wearing personal protective equipment and also to things like requiring people to sign on and sign out. All of these are pretty common practices in our workplaces, and so we were able to really quickly and really effectively add to that with our pandemic response and get some really important outcomes through the program.

Ms RICHARDS: Thank you, Minister.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mr Sam Hibbins.

Mr HIBBINS: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Minister and your team, for appearing this afternoon.

I just want to take you back to the decision of the COVID cabinet for the immediate lockdown of the public housing towers. Was it the explicit recommendation of the Chief Health Officer for an immediate lockdown of those towers?

Ms ALLAN: In answering that question I will refer you to the comments I made to Mr Limbrick's question just before. I am not in a position and I will not be drawn into a position of discussing the detailed conversations that go on in that cabinet forum other than to say there was very clear advice that the virus was in the public housing towers and that we needed to act very, very quickly. The information I have before me is that there were on 1 July 17 active cases across the nine towers in North Melbourne and Flemington. In three days that jumped to 34—

Mr HIBBINS: I am aware of—

Ms ALLAN: and after the testing of residents was completed, five days later, it was 200 residents had—

Mr HIBBINS: But, Minister, this is about the advice.

Ms ALLAN: Yes, I understand that, but I guess why I am sharing that data with you is again it goes back to the answer I gave to Mr Limbrick's question, which was: there are choices, there are options, we are given

advice; ultimately it is the responsibility of cabinet and cabinet committees and cabinet ministers to make a proportionate decision, and in this instance it was the right decision.

We certainly acknowledge it was a decision that caused distress for those residences. It was a deeply distressing set of circumstances to be confronted with, most confronting for those residences of course, but we made this decision in the full knowledge of the consequences of that decision.

Mr HIBBINS: There were alternative options considered.

Ms ALLAN: I am not going to be drawn here and now, because it is not appropriate to go to the deliberations of cabinet and cabinet committee processes, other than to say, in this instance—

Mr HIBBINS: Did the Chief Health Officer provide any advice to the cabinet on that decision?

Ms ALLAN: The Chief Health Officer, throughout the entire course of the pandemic, gave advice to the government.

Mr HIBBINS: Well, that is not the question, though.

Ms ALLAN: No, it is, because—

Mr HIBBINS: No, it is a specific question.

Ms ALLAN: It is, because all decisions on the level of restrictions, the decisions that had to be taken were informed by—

Mr HIBBINS: But in this particular instance.

Ms ALLAN: Yes, it was informed by public health advice, and do you know with the public health advice told us? The public health advice told us that in three days the cases went from 17 to 34 cases and that there was a rate of community transmission in these towers that we had not seen in Victoria, so—

Mr HIBBINS: What I am trying to get to is what advice was provided to cabinet.

Ms ALLAN: As I have just indicated to you, I am not in a position to reveal the deliberations of cabinet. What I can refer you to is the public comments of public health officials, where they described the public housing towers as vertical cruise ships.

Mr HIBBINS: Would you be prepared to provide the advice that cabinet was given to this committee?

Ms ALLAN: That is not my advice to share. As I indicated before in some of the earlier questions, I can answer these questions insofar as I was a member of the Crisis Council of Cabinet, but I am not in a position to go into the policy or the portfolio responsibilities of the ministers in this area.

Mr HIBBINS: Thank you, Minister. Let us talk transport.

Ms ALLAN: Active transport?

Mr HIBBINS: Yes. Well, first of all, in the time I have got left, it was good to see that the government finally stumped up for some pop-up bike lanes in the inner city. If it had done so earlier, we could have avoided some more robust conversations at PAEC, but there is nothing wrong with that, is there? The funding, however, for those pop-up bike lanes was not actually in this year's budget. Where is that funding actually being accounted for?

Ms ALLAN: Yes. If I cannot find that quickly and easily, we will come back to you. You will be pleased to know, Mr Hibbins, I prepared for this question and I have pages and pages of information of points to make—

Mr HIBBINS: You can provide it on notice if you like.

Ms ALLAN: about active transport. If I cannot find it easily, I will come back to you on the pop-up—well, my notes say that it is, in the 2020–21 budget, \$15.965 million to deliver 100 kilometres of new and improved

pop-up cycling routes across inner-city Melbourne. Is that the same that you were referring to? And Nick tells me it is BP3, page 127.

Mr HIBBINS: Great. Terrific. Thank you. In terms of a previous question that I asked you, it was about the increased services that you announced to allow people to better socially distance on our train and tram networks. Now, I asked you what the cost of that initiative was and in your answer to the question you said, 'Costs for the additional services are assessed in line with contractual requirements to determine appropriate cost outcome'. Now, that is not actually the cost of the initiative. Are you able to inform the committee what the actual cost of that initiative is?

Ms ALLAN: Just for clarity, are you referring to the 95 services that we announced back in July? Is that the one you are referring to?

Mr HIBBINS: Correct.

Ms ALLAN: Yes. Give me one moment. I think I will need to come back to you on where those funds are allocated. Hang on, the Secretary is now helping me out. They are part of the—sorry, my eyesight is not that good—\$438 million on BP3, page 127, so it is in that allocation of funding.

Mr HIBBINS: What initiative is that under?

Ms ALLAN: It is called 'Public transport coronavirus (COVID-19) response'.

Mr HIBBINS: Yes, well, can you give me an actual breakdown of the figures?

Ms ALLAN: Oh, you want a breakdown of the 95 services?

Mr HIBBINS: Yes.

Ms ALLAN: On that we will need to report back.

Mr HIBBINS: But will you actually provide me with an answer on that one? Because I have asked once—

Ms ALLAN: Okay.

Mr HIBBINS: No, no, no—I mean, it is a fair question. You have given me a total of—

Ms ALLAN: That is fine. You are getting very stern with me, that is all.

Mr HIBBINS: Well, the coronavirus response obviously covers a wide range of initiatives. I am after the costings for this particular initiative. Is there any reason why you would not be able to provide that information to the committee?

Ms ALLAN: Right now I just literally do not have that information in front of me. I would have thought you would have liked 95 extra public transport services.

Mr HIBBINS: I do.

Ms ALLAN: Oh, good.

Mr HIBBINS: I just want to know how much it costs.

Ms ALLAN: Okay. Are we helping you with your policy costings?

Mr HIBBINS: Well, we always get into a dispute over it.

Mr RIORDAN: They are not big into recording how much things cost, if you have not noticed. It is a theme.

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan!

Ms ALLAN: Yes, literally I just do not have that breakdown at hand.

Mr HIBBINS: Unfortunately you do not provide the information to the PBO. Maybe if you provide it direct to us, it might assist the public and the committee.

Mr RIORDAN: But she does press releases. She has told you stuff in press releases.

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, you have had your turn.

Ms ALLAN: At least we run services, my friend, and do not close train lines.

Mr RIORDAN: Oh, yeah, you just have no idea what it costs you. It has been happening over years and years and years—

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, you are out of order. Mr Hibbins has the call.

Mr D O'BRIEN: You have no idea how hypocritical you sound, do you? No, you don't.

The CHAIR: Mr O'Brien, Mr Hibbins has the call.

Mr HIBBINS: Mind you, I will refer to the PBO's annual report regarding those comments. In terms of the graphs you showed earlier on how public transport patronage is low and on how the number of cars on our roads is low but is increasing, do you anticipate that the roads will actually go over 100 per cent of what they were prior to the lockdown?

Ms ALLAN: Look, we are keeping a very close eye on this because obviously that would cause significant congestion issues on our roads. As I said, the roads data as at yesterday was 97 per cent of baseline, so it is creeping very close to that 100 per cent of pre-pandemic levels. We would be concerned if it went back above 100 per cent of pre-pandemic levels. That is one of the drivers, pardon the pun, behind why we committed the \$340 million to that roads package back in July—so we could, from the middle of this year, start implementing those measures on our road network, whether they are technology measures or enforcement measures, particularly around clearways and tollway zones, to have those practices in place well ahead of the return of significant volumes of traffic.

Mr HIBBINS: But do your projections show that it will go to over 100 per cent?

Ms ALLAN: We do not have advice at this stage, but it looks like the Secretary is very keen to answer this.

Mr YOUNIS: Thanks, Minister. I do not mean to cut across there. There is a lot of modelling that is going on and we are working with Infrastructure Victoria, and Infrastructure Victoria will come out in the next few weeks, I think, to give some further advice on what that modelling looks like. In the roads space, we expect that it will put a lot of pressure on that 100 per cent. In Brisbane, for example, they went over the 100 per cent soon after lockdown. That is one of the reasons why we are increasing services on the public transport network; we want to increase the confidence in people using the public transport network so that they can go back to that as they come back to work. The benefit we have as a public transport service right now is that we are not having all people back to work, and there is the message around that. So that helps us in that lead-in to what will, I think, become a critical period towards the end of January. Our modelling shows that when school goes back, when people are starting to come back to work in that middle of January towards the end of January period, there will be pressure on the network and on the road network in particular. The long-term impact modelling varies across the world, and we are certainly updating our modelling all the time in relation to that. As I said, Infrastructure Victoria, and some of the work we are doing with Monash University as well, is updating some of those models. So we do expect there will be pressure on our road network. That is why we invested in a lot of those measures which will keep that transport going. But we cannot be certain about that, Mr Hibbins, because it is a very unusual environment.

Mr HIBBINS: Do you have an idea about when public transport might reach back to 100 per cent?

Mr YOUNIS: Depending on the progress of vaccines and all of those things, we do not expect it to come back to 100 per cent in the calendar year of 2021.

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

Mr RICHARDSON: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister and department representatives, for joining us again. I want to take you back, Minister, to the topic of the Big Build continuing, and you were going through some of the protocols in the middle of the coronavirus pandemic. We saw this up close in my community—on the Mordialloc Freeway and on the removal of level crossings at Cheltenham and Mentone—and the work that I observed, and a number of members of my community observed, was outstanding during that time. As we transition into some of the projects that will be ongoing—and particularly Chelsea, Edithvale and Bonbeach come to mind, and the continuing works at Mordialloc Freeway—how will those restrictions, now that they have been eased, have the protocols in place as a result post some of those infections, and what are those controls that will be in place?

Ms ALLAN: Thank you. It is good that you have pointed out your own very local experience about how the works were able to continue during that period of the pandemic but also too how it has influenced how worksites will operate into the future. This might surprise some of our colleagues, but it is a government question and I might ask Corey to supplement some of my answer on this point, because that point that you make around what this means going forward is a really, really good one. I mentioned before, in response to Pauline's question, that there is already a very strong OH&S foundation that we can build on for these sorts of practices. We also know that in the absence of a widely administered vaccine we will need to continue to operate in a COVID-safe way for some time, and our construction sites are no different. I might ask Corey to add to that.

Mr HANNETT: Thanks, Minister. Earlier in the year, when we were faced with the crisis, the first thing we had to do with all of our contractors was—they had to put COVID plans in place. The minister mentioned before that we have a very robust safety management system, so it was a matter of actually implementing mitigations for the extra risk of infection on the projects. First of all, at all sites resources that were not required to be on site were asked to go home. That meant my team went home as well. So over half the team went home and worked from home, and we just left the resources on the projects that needed to be there. So the plans were in place. The first thing we did do, though, was make sure from that very next day that for anybody who came to the site there was a proper tracing system to make sure that we tracked every resource on the project and we had our social distancing measures in place. On top of that we set up hygiene cleaning in all the common areas where the workforce had to go, access and egress, and made sure that we staggered time frames for when people started and finished work, so we split everybody apart. That was across the whole program.

It is probably just worth pointing out that our workforce of 18 000 directly on the jobs is part of it but there is an indirect workforce as well of around 30 000. So you are talking actually 50 000 people plus working on the program. That is a huge workforce not to be working, and that was why it was so important to us to actually keep it carefully going safely, and we had to do it safely. So we had the hygiene cleaning, the social distancing and all the PPE. Everyone had to wear long sleeves, long shirts, gloves, glasses and hardhats—that is the normal process. On top of that, though, there were obviously the masks. For everyone who came to and from site we implemented different measures, whether it was temperature testing or setting up machines which actually tested everybody. All the contractors had different innovative solutions, which were shared across the whole program, and we are still doing that today. So essentially until there is a vaccine in place we have to make sure that our workforce can work safely. That is very, very important, and we will keep doing that.

I made a decision earlier in the year to set up a team who made a conscious effort every day to go to all sites on a periodic basis to audit. I think we have done over 6000 inspections of all the sites, just to make sure that the measures that were supposed to be in place were put there—and they were. So the industry themselves have done a great job of actually lifting the standard and actually making sure they do it. On top of that there was regular dialogue between us, the unions and the CEOs of the construction companies. I spent a lot of time with the CEOs just making sure that the executive teams of the construction companies right around Australia were totally across what was going on. So it was a very active and hands-on approach to carefully working through these times. I will give you a good example. On the Upfield line we had to make a decision to do the closure or not, and we did. But we had to be very confident that as we did that we did not in fact cause a problem, which we did not. When you have got over 1000 people working in a place, you have got to be very careful about how you do it, and again the workforce, the management and everybody involved so far have made a great effort.

On top of that we have also got some proactive testing we have done across the program. We allowed the workforce to be tested even when they did not have any symptoms so that we were being proactive about actually just making sure we were reaching and having an independent look at that. We also did a heap of

proactive face mask testing, which was a different type of COVID test, on top of that, and we are working closely with DHHS right now on some further different tests which will give us results far quicker in the future as well. So there has been an enormous amount of effort by a lot of people, and so far we have been able to certainly keep the Big Build program moving. We just need to make sure that we do keep working carefully with our construction partners, with the community, with the public and with the construction industry to keep them moving.

Mr RICHARDSON: Fantastic. I just want to go to the topic of direct jobs that were saved or protected during that time. I know that there are 400-plus workers on the Mordialloc Freeway, as an example, and 1700 at Cheltenham and Mentone—and that is just a subsection, not to mention all the spillover and indirect jobs as well. But how many direct jobs were saved during that COVID-19 pandemic period with construction allowed to continue?

Ms ALLAN: Thank you. As I mentioned before in the previous hearing, we support around 18 000 direct employees over our program and 30 000 more are supported across the supply chain. If I could flip your question to the negative, almost all of these would have been at risk if we had not both managed and slowed the spread of the virus more broadly across the community but also managed our construction sites in the safe way that we did to allow them to continue to operate safely. I think we saw the impact in other industries—what a shutdown meant and how difficult that was—and I think that would have posed some real challenges for us in terms of stopping those projects, and then having to gear back up would have been an even harder task. So that is why even during that stage 4 period of time there were some projects that were allowed to continue to operate and others were operating on what was coined a ‘pilot-light level’ of about 25 per cent of its workforce. Again, it is a great credit to the MTIA team that even those projects that had lower levels of operation managed to maintain program. A good example is the North East Link Project, the early works that have started. They started earlier in the year and they had to drop back to 25 per cent levels of operation, and luckily they have not had to extend the time to deliver that project.

I mentioned before the way we have been able to use the period of the pandemic. Corey mentioned in his comments that whilst certainly a lot changed for everyone, the work just continued in people’s lounge rooms, bedrooms, front yards, backyards. The working-from-home arrangements meant that we could still get a lot of our planning and design work done, which meant that we could come out of the pandemic with that announcement a couple of weeks ago of fast-tracking a whole range of level crossings and being able to award a whole bunch of contracts—around \$1.5 billion worth of contracts.

That is in addition to the building works package, which across government supports 3700 direct jobs. The work that is happening in transport will support around 600 jobs, and from a little bit of a parochial point of view around half of this investment will be found in regional Victoria, supporting those regional communities as well.

Mr RICHARDSON: It is not, I guess, instinctive for people to think about those broader economic benefits. You think of those direct jobs in construction, but there are also those indirect jobs in the tens of thousands. Minister, I am wondering if you could outline for the committee’s benefit the economic benefits of construction continuing for those indirect jobs more broadly?

Ms ALLAN: Yes. It is good to have a bit of a chance to talk about in a bit more detail those indirect jobs. I have used that figure of 18 000 a lot today in my evidence at the committee across our program, but there are an estimated over 30 000—about 31 500—indirect jobs that are supported through our program each year. Some examples of the industries that are supported through our program include, for example, steel fabricators, and of course we have got that commitment to 100 per cent Australian steel on our level crossing removal program; aggregate and cement suppliers; and concrete precast manufacturers. I will just point to the outcome of the West Gate Tunnel and the Metro Tunnel projects where it was the concrete manufacturers at Benalla and Deer Park that provided the concrete segments to those projects—another great example of how we use our local content requirements through our tender processes to drive, in those indirect industries, local jobs to work on our program. Asphalt—I have been talking a lot today; I am finding it hard to get around my words—suppliers and plant machinery are just some of the examples of many that are supported through our program.

Then of course there are, again through our procurement levers, the jobs that are supported in social enterprises right around the state. There is a nursery disability services provider in the Yarra Valley that provides a lot of

the plants for our landscaping around our level crossing sites. I think on the Upfield line there were some social enterprises who provided catering for the Upfield line project. There are Aboriginal employment providers who are contracted on our level crossing removal program. This is also a fabulous way that we can provide jobs but also that skill and training element that helps transfer that job into a longer term, meaningful employment opportunity. That comes as a result of very deliberately writing those requirements into our procurement practices.

Mr RICHARDSON: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. Ms Bridget Vallence, MP.

Ms VALLENCE: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister and department, for appearing. First question to you, Secretary. Secretary, since March this year and to date during the pandemic, how much has been spent on Big Build advertising, both traditional and digital?

Mr YOUNIS: Thank you, Ms Vallence. So overall the advertising budget for the 2019–20 financial year was around \$8.3 million. That includes all the Big Build and department advertising, and Mr Foa indicated some of that advertising was about giving safe on the network, so it includes a range of different advertising campaigns and interaction with the community that we have had through this period. It also includes advertising such as where we ran a program advising people and giving information about not stopping, and protecting yourself, across level crossings—so you do not stop in the middle of level crossings. Hopefully of course we do not have to do too many more of them if we build some level crossings, but that sort of advertising is a part of that program. So all up the figure is around \$8.3 million.

Ms VALLENCE: Thank you, Secretary. Mr Hannett, we had this discussion, actually in the first round of the hearings of COVID, back in May. Of course these are the third hearings for this. Back in the first round of hearings you gave evidence that you had begun discussions with many of the major contractors on the major infrastructure projects to provide additional funding in order to keep these projects going through COVID, through the pandemic. Can you please now tell the committee how much additional funding was provided specifically for the Metro Tunnel project and the West Gate Tunnel Project in order for works to continue during COVID?

Mr HANNETT: In terms of all our contracts across the program, we have been having ongoing discussions with our construction partners for well over six months.

Ms VALLENCE: Specifically for those two projects?

Mr HANNETT: Yes. So this point in time we have not actually provided any extra funding for COVID per se. Until the pandemic is over and we work through the issue, we will not be in a position to actually exactly state what extra funding we will provide. Because one thing which is worth pointing out here is a lot of the jobs, I suppose, back in March where we thought we would be today is probably not where we are. In some ways we are ahead, and I will give you an example: with the tunnel boring machines on the Metro Tunnel, they are ahead of the program. They have actually achieved a better productivity than they thought they would two years ago. Another example is the level crossings. We did the big 92-day closure for the four removals of crossings on the Upfield line.

Ms VALLENCE: Back when we were discussing this in May, you said at that time that you were having discussions about providing, you know, additional resources and additional money so that they could continue working—with additional PPE and all of those things—during COVID. So just to confirm, no money has been provided to any of these contractors?

Mr HANNETT: Not in terms of actually increasing contract sums for this issue. If you are talking about cash flow, which was part of my evidence back then, that is a—

Ms VALLENCE: That is right. The specific question is: what additional funding, what additional money, has been provided specifically to those two projects for works to keep them going during COVID?

Mr HANNETT: Yes. So at this point in time, no additional funding.

Ms VALLENCE: Okay. Has any additional funding been provided to any of the level crossing removals in order for them to continue during COVID?

Mr HANNETT: Yes, for the level crossings the alliance contracts are different. With the alliance contracts the companies are reimbursed on a monthly basis for what they spend, so on the crossings in particular the cost is the cost. So we set contract sums and what is spent per month is paid for, and that is what has happened.

Ms VALLENCE: So any incremental—what am I taking from that? No incremental funding to keep them going during COVID?

Mr HANNETT: We have reimbursed them the costs they have actually requested every month and—

Ms VALLENCE: So have those costs reflected anything that you had not otherwise expected because of COVID?

Mr HANNETT: I think we have actually gone better than we thought we would six months ago. On the Upfield line—I will just finish what I was referencing before—when the patrons on the trains dropped so much, the bussing costs of those big closures reduced a lot. For a 90-day shut, it was roughly \$1 million a day in bussing. When you have got 7 per cent of people on trains, you are saving 93 per cent of \$1 million a day, so we probably had an \$80-odd million saving just in that one example. The other thing that also happened is that across the whole program, with the road network being so quiet and the rail network being quiet as well, we have been able to do more work more efficiently. We actually consciously ramped up the work, for example, on the West Gate Freeway and the Monash and some of the arterial roads to help our construction partners actually be more efficient.

Ms VALLENCE: Okay. Minister, the Australian Open tennis has now been announced for 8 February. How will you manage contact tracing for patrons on public transport?

Ms ALLAN: The contact-tracing arrangements for people on public transport will be done within the broader contact-tracing framework that is operated for all Victorians across the state.

Ms VALLENCE: So in terms of any different communication for contact tracing, and I might add to that as well, do you expect increased public transport services during that time? School will be back. There might be additional people wanting to get to the tennis.

Ms ALLAN: Well, by 8 February people choosing to use public transport can benefit from any of the 450 additional weekly services that will be operating from 31 January across the entire metropolitan and regional network, and that builds of course on the 95 additional weekly services that have been in operation since July this year. That brings it to—how is my maths—well over 550 additional weekly services that will be there in February that were not there in December of this year, so there will be extra services. In terms of what additional public transport services will be provided for the Australian Open, I would have to refer you to the Minister for Public Transport. I know from my previous occupation in that role that they are matters that are undertaken once the events are locked in. There is—

Ms VALLENCE: I guess, given the fact that—

Ms ALLAN: If I could finish—

Ms VALLENCE: Just with COVID, you know—

Ms ALLAN: There are event management frameworks that we operate within for all of our major events. Whether it is the cricket, the tennis or the grand prix, we have discussions with the event organisers about running extra public transport services, and that is something that is the responsibility of the public transport minister.

Ms VALLENCE: Okay. Minister, I will just step back. We were just talking about the Big Build projects. In terms of the Big Build projects and the regular engagement that you have described to the committee with contractors and unions and the workforce, for the West Gate Tunnel Project can you list the milestones that have been impacted and delayed and the cost impact for each of these milestone delays during this pandemic period?

Ms ALLAN: Could you provide me with a list of the milestone delays you are referring to?

Ms VALLENCE: I know this is not a budget hearing, but I am referring to having read that there have been delays on that project, and of course those delays have been happening during this—

I think it is well publicised that there have been delays, and we discussed that before. That is what I am asking you, actually: which milestones have been delayed? We know that there have been delays. It is detailed in your budget paper reference.

Ms ALLAN: Well, I was wondering what additional delays you were referring to over and above what we have already discussed this morning.

Ms VALLENCE: Well, this is for COVID.

Ms ALLAN: That is what I am referring to.

Ms VALLENCE: So in terms of this, I am asking: during this period, those milestone delays that have occurred—can you advise which of them have been delayed during COVID and the cost impact of each of these delays?

Ms ALLAN: Well, I really have nothing further to add to what Corey Hannett just answered in terms of the questions you asked around—

Ms VALLENCE: Well, Mr Hannett did not provide any detail in relation to costs.

Ms ALLAN: Yes, he did. He said to you very clearly in your question about the Metro Tunnel and the West Gate Tunnel and your question about additional funding provided for those projects. His answer was no.

Ms VALLENCE: My question to Mr Hannett was about additional cost specifically for changed work practices due to COVID. My question to you is in relation to the milestones for the project generally, setting aside COVID.

Ms ALLAN: No, we cannot set aside COVID, because we are in the COVID hearing.

Ms VALLENCE: Yes, but it is delays that have been occurring during this COVID period. They will have been exacerbated by social distancing and all of those things.

Ms ALLAN: Well, then, that is COVID related.

Ms VALLENCE: That is right. So what is the cost?

Ms ALLAN: Corey has just answered that.

Ms VALLENCE: We are after dollar figures.

Ms ALLAN: But Corey has just answered your question about COVID-related delays.

Ms VALLENCE: So no cost impact at all?

Ms ALLAN: Well, COVID-related delays. That is what you just said, wasn't it, Corey?

Mr HANNETT: No adjustment to the contract sums.

Ms ALLAN: Adjustment of the contract sum—yes, which is the same thing.

Mr HANNETT: At this point in time, yes.

Ms ALLAN: Yes.

Ms VALLENCE: So for delays in the project delivery that have transpired during COVID, how has that impacted the cost of the project and could you provide the costs?

Ms ALLAN: Corey has just answered that.

Ms VALLENCE: Pardon?

Ms ALLAN: Corey did just answer that.

Ms VALLENCE: Okay. So we are not going to get an answer for that.

The CHAIR: You have had an answer.

Ms ALLAN: No, no. Do not verbal. Corey just answered that.

Ms VALLENCE: I will review the transcript and note that.

Ms ALLAN: The record will show the crocodile tears. You are now concerned about delays for a project you tried to delay last week in the Parliament. It is very confusing to keep up with the contradiction of those opposite. I must say it is very confusing.

Ms VALLENCE: When you descend to personal attacks, I think that is pretty clear.

Ms ALLAN: There is no personal attack there. It is a political one against your collective—nothing personal about it at all.

Ms VALLENCE: It is a general MO of yours to descend into personal attacks.

Ms ALLAN: No, no. Excuse me, Chair. I am going to ask for that to be withdrawn, because that in itself reflects a personal attack on me. I am going to ask you to withdraw.

Ms VALLENCE: I will also ask you to withdraw suggesting that we have crocodile tears.

The CHAIR: Ms Vallence, this is extremely frivolous.

Ms VALLENCE: I agree, Chair.

The CHAIR: I would ask that you respond to the minister's request to withdraw the allegation of verballing—you suggesting there was a personal attack on yourself by the minister.

Mr RIORDAN: Gee, you might need a whiteboard for that explanation.

The CHAIR: Well, I think it is probably representative of the ridiculous conversation that we are having. But I think you will find that the minister made no personal allegation on yourself and to suggest that she did is to misrepresent her at the table. So you may want to correct the record, Ms Vallence.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Well, that in itself is not a personal attack.

The CHAIR: Right.

Ms VALLENCE: Minister, can you please provide an update on the progress in making the learners permit test available online? We had an announcement that it was going to be early in the new year. Could you provide an update on that?

Ms ALLAN: I might ask for some assistance from the department. But I have just got some advice in terms of your request regarding the Australian Open. My understanding is there are some media reports speculating on what you indicated earlier. There is no confirmation as yet. I just want to make this clear: my comments around public transport services for major events were more broadly what we do for every major event rather than the specifics around the Australian Open.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Good to see Marty is watching.

Ms ALLAN: No, he is on holidays.

The CHAIR: Thank you. The member's time has expired. Ms Nina Taylor, MLC.

Ms TAYLOR: So keeping on Big Build projects, we know how critical they are for the community and we also know that consultation and community engagement is a really important part of it. I will vouch for that because I have been chair of the Mentone and Cheltenham level crossing removal works, and I just know how important that collaboration is; I have seen it myself. So how did consultation continue during the pandemic?

Ms ALLAN: Yes, thank you. That was, again, one of the many ways we changed the way we live and work during the period of the pandemic. We were determined to continue the strong program of community engagement we have across all of our road and rail projects that you, Nina, obviously referred to from your own personal experience, and we wanted to make sure that we continued that during the period of the pandemic. We did move a lot of the community engagement activity online, so obviously the pop-up stalls and the doorknocking and those sorts of activities had to be wound back, but we were able to keep up the online engagement and obviously correspondence via email and the like. In fact in many instances, I think perhaps because people were at home a bit more and looking for something to do, we got a great response across many of our projects. Whether it was some of the activities around the level crossing removals, the road projects, our regional rail programs, we were able to continue with that community engagement, which is a really big and important feature of the way we deliver our projects. I should also point out that in many instances community engagement through that period of announcing the project—the design phase, the tender phase—ahead of delivery really helps shape the final project outcomes. At a lot of locations, when we remove level crossings people want to see cycling and walking activities. I think the Chair can reflect on the keenness of people to see off-leash dog paths in her neck of the woods as part of the Upfield level—

The CHAIR: Yes.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Yes, last year we had heaps on it.

Ms ALLAN: Yes, I didn't know. Well—

Mr D O'BRIEN: Sorry, but I just got a little bit excited.

Ms ALLAN: I could have given a cheerio.

Mr D O'BRIEN: The Member for Mordialloc got really excited about it.

Ms ALLAN: It is good to see the Member for South Gippsland is awake over there in the corner and is focused on his off-leash dog—

Mr D O'BRIEN: Dog parks always get us excited over here, Minister. We have had heaps of discussions about them.

Ms ALLAN: I think we are reaching the end of this session, aren't we?

Mr D O'BRIEN: It has been a long couple of weeks, Minister.

Mr RIORDAN: We had Dorothy Dixier after Dorothy Dixier on dog parks last year. Everyone got a dog park chat.

Ms RICHARDS: Our constituents care about them.

Ms ALLAN: You all still have a few hours left.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Hours? We have got another day yet.

The CHAIR: Mr O'Brien.

Ms ALLAN: I can keep going on off-leash dog parks.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Yes, please do.

Ms ALLAN: Do you want me to keep going on off-leash dog parks?

Mr D O'BRIEN: Minister, we are all ears.

Ms VALLENCE: I wonder if they can table the cost of dog parks.

Ms ALLAN: In all seriousness, until we were rudely interrupted—

Mr D O'BRIEN: Sorry.

Ms ALLAN: it is a way that we shape the final design of a project. Some may call those additions to our projects a cost; we call that an investment as a consequence of our community engagement, because it does make for a better project and better outcomes. I know Mr Richardson could probably talk about the historic Mentone station and the great work that has gone on there to protect the gardens, protect the station, build a wonderful deck and a plaza area at the historic station whilst we have removed the level crossings there.

This is all a really important part of delivering our projects, because we want to make the most of every single taxpayer dollar we spend on a project. We want to make sure we are maximising the value, both in the delivery of the project, what it achieves from a passenger transport community point of view, and then you wraparound the other procurement outcomes, like our Indigenous employment targets, the requirement to use social enterprises through our social procurement policies, our Major Projects Skills Guarantee, which is the requirement for all of our projects to have 10 per cent of the hours worked, worked by apprentices, trainees and cadets. This all goes to the approach that is behind our major project delivery, which is about maximising every single dollar in every single project to get these great outcomes across a range of different areas.

Ms TAYLOR: Indeed. Thank you. We know with construction projects there is a huge amount of planning and design. Did this continue during the pandemic?

Ms ALLAN: It did. I think I might be a little bit at risk of repeating what Corey mentioned before, people were working from home and did a terrific job in maintaining really high levels of productivity. I think we have all had that experience of the challenge of being productive while we may have been caring for relatives or providing learning from home lessons for little people in our house. It was certainly a challenging period.

But our design teams did a great job and our planners did a great job. Again, this is another really good example of the point I have wanted to make a few times over the course of today's hearings, which is the focus is often on construction jobs, which is good and important, but also too there are so many other occupations that make up the delivery of our major projects. A lot of this work—what was the figure? What percentage of our workforce ended up at home—overall?

Mr HANNETT: Fifty per cent—10 000.

Ms ALLAN: Fifty per cent; 10 000 people working from home as part of the overall Big Build program, and they continued to be involved either in the community engagement program, doing the design work on station works or cycling paths or off-leash dog paths or whatever the additional requirements were; doing the tender documentation. That is a really big part of work that is done as part of our projects, getting all of our documentation in place so it is procurement ready; the market engagement; doing the work for our friends in the department of environment and planning so that we have got all of our regulatory documentation in place. That is a whole additional machine of work and activity that goes on that is just as critical to getting our projects delivered as the work you see out in the field.

Ms TAYLOR: Thank you. What role will construction play as we recover from the pandemic—so looking forward?

Ms ALLAN: Sorry, Nina, I just missed the last bit.

Ms TAYLOR: I am too far away. I think I was leaning right back.

Ms ALLAN: You were, and it is echoey.

Ms TAYLOR: Let me lean forward.

Ms ALLAN: Terribly echoey in here.

Ms TAYLOR: I will lean in. Looking forward, what role will construction play in the recovery from the pandemic?

Ms ALLAN: Look, this has been a bit of a theme across the course of the day, hasn't it?

Ms TAYLOR: Yes, I think so—with good reason.

Ms ALLAN: And to be honest, it is a bit of a theme of the budget. If you go back to the presentation I made about 5½ hours ago, at 8.30 this morning, I referred to the figures that since 2015 somewhere between 20 and 25 per cent of the jobs created in Victoria have been associated with the delivery of infrastructure. So if you go back to when we came to office at the end of 2014, our economy was not as strong as it should be. We did not have the pipeline of projects that Victoria should have had to support economic activity, to support jobs and to support better transport connections. And so we have dramatically turned that around and we have now had a big increase in the number of people working in our projects. Our challenge now is to sustain that level, and that is what we are doing by each budget—we add to projects big and small. And we have seen, referring in this year's budget to the housing funds, the \$5.3 billion in housing is a good example of how we are adding to the construction sector in the state.

We need to not just sustain that level of employment in our state and maintain it. We need to look at how we can grow the pipeline into the future so that we do not have the situation we had back in 2015 when we were gearing up the big machines around Metro Tunnel and level crossing removal. We had to convince companies to come back to Victoria and invest in their people in Victoria, because there had not been a pipeline that they could see ahead of them. Well, we do not have that problem so much now. We have got a lot of investment here by many of those professional services firms, the third parties and contractors who work with us on the delivery of our program. They can invest in their plant and equipment, they can invest in their people here in Victoria because they can see the pipeline ahead. And that is going to be a big part of our economic recovery through this pandemic, holding on to that activity of people. They are often in really high-paid, high-skilled, good jobs, sustainable jobs. We want to hold on to that activity and then look at growing it in other areas so that we can continue to support the economy through the rebuild, and then in other parts of government look at how we can supplement that, whether it is through the housing program, the school building program or our Jobs for Victoria program, which is about helping people who have lost their job during the pandemic, who have never been out of work before, to plug back into new employment opportunities. I am sure Minister Pulford would have spoken to you at her budget hearing about that terrific program. We have got opportunities to connect that program into our pipeline so we can provide people with employment pathways into our program.

Ms TAYLOR: Yes, very important. Thank you. There has been quite a bit of discussion today, quite naturally, about the impact of COVID on different types of transport use. Can you talk through the impact that the easing of restrictions is having on traffic across the road network and measures the government is taking to respond to this?

Ms ALLAN: Yes, I can. We have spoken a little bit in this session about the road movements. We are keeping a very keen eye on the movement of people on our road network. That was why back in June we announced that \$340 million package of road-based initiatives, to help put in place measures so that as we were coming out of the pandemic and moving into this period of recovery we had the architecture of that program in place to help respond to the increasing road usage. So this program is looking at three traffic hotspots in the west, the east and the south-eastern suburbs of Melbourne. We are seeing the program being rolled out right now where it involves the deployment of new technology across those different areas, so things like using CCTV, connecting it up with bluetooth and your wireless sensors and making sure that they are providing that data directly into both our system and the devices that motorists use to help them navigate around the system.

I think I mentioned before some of the enforcement measures that we are putting in place around changes to clearways. That clearway measure came into place on 1 December. That resulted in 221 new tow-away zones, taking the total number across Melbourne to 326. This was a bit of an issue that the department identified would be a fairly—I do not want to say easy, because these things are never easy—straightforward way of making an adjustment to our enforcement regime to keep the traffic moving.

Ms TAYLOR: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Minister. That concludes the time we have available for consideration of the government's response to the COVID pandemic in relation to your portfolios. Thank you very much to yourself and your officials for appearing before our committee in these capacities today. The committee will follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing, and responses will be required within five working days of the committee's request.

I declare this hearing adjourned. Thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.